

# THE REALITIES OF GIRLHOOD IN CONTEMPORARY IRELAND IN EIMEAR MCBRIDE’S *A GIRL IS A HALF- FORMED THING* (2013) AND LOUISE O’NEILL’S *ASKING FOR IT* (2015)<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This article examines the representations of girlhood in contemporary Irish fiction, in which sexual assault is normalised, and victims are silenced in response. It looks specifically at *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (Eimear McBride, 2013) and *Asking for It* (Louise O’Neill, 2015). Girlhood in these novels is dominated by the threat of sexual assault and the existence of rape culture, especially in a digital age and #MeToo era. In post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, critics have noted a growth in YA literature, especially female authors addressing “uncomfortable but important matters in their works”, including “violence against teenage girls and women in Ireland” (Seijas-Pérez 66). Both protagonists in these novels, the Girl in *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, and Emma in *Asking for It*, experience sexual assault. The reactions of the local community and close friends or family to both girls’ experiences of sexual assault illustrate community and institutional responses to trauma in an Irish context. The article will analyse themes of shame and trauma, using close readings from the novels to break down the aftermaths of each individual experience of sexual violence within a broader cultural context. The works of Cathy Caruth and Susan Cahill, amongst others, will be used in this analysis in order to expose the lived realities of girlhood in contemporary Ireland.

**Keywords:** Sexual Assault; Rape Culture; Trauma; Girlhood; Sexuality; Post-Celtic Tiger Fiction; Young Adult Literature

## LAS REALIDADES DE LA ADOLESCENCIA FEMENINA EN LA IRLANDA CONTEMPORÁNEA EN *A GIRL IS A HALF-FORMED*

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*THING* (2013) DE EIMEAR MCBRIDE Y *ASKING FOR IT*  
(2015) DE LOUISE O’NEILL

Resumen: Este artículo examina la representación de la adolescencia femenina en la ficción contemporánea irlandesa, donde se normalizan las agresiones sexuales, resultando en el silenciamiento de las víctimas. El análisis se centra específicamente en *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013) de Eimear McBride y en *Asking for It* (2015) de Louise O’Neill. La adolescencia femenina en estas novelas está dominada por la amenaza de las agresiones sexuales y la existencia de la cultura de la violación, especialmente en la época digital y en la era del #MeToo. En la Irlanda post Tigre Celta, se ha observado un crecimiento de la literatura juvenil, especialmente de autoras mujeres que abordan “cuestiones incómodas pero importantes en sus trabajos”, incluyendo “la violencia contra las chicas adolescentes y las mujeres en Irlanda” (Seijas-Pérez 66). Ambas protagonistas de estas novelas, la Chica en *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, y Emma en *Asking for It*, sufren violaciones. Las reacciones de la comunidad local y amistades cercanas o familias ante sus experiencias de violencia sexual muestran las respuestas comunitarias e institucionales a eventos traumáticos en el contexto irlandés. El artículo analizará cuestiones de vergüenza y trauma, a través de una lectura detallada de las novelas que analizará las secuelas de las experiencias individuales de violencia sexual dentro del amplio contexto cultural. Los trabajos de Cathy Caruth y Susan Cahill, entre otros, serán utilizados en este análisis con el fin de exponer las realidades que viven las chicas adolescentes en la Irlanda contemporánea.

Palabras clave: agresión sexual; cultura de la violación; trauma; adolescencia femenina; ficción post Tigre Celta; literatura juvenil.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates the impact of trauma on individual characters and the broader societal response to this in the novels *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013) by Eimear McBride and *Asking for It* (2015) by Louise O’Neill. In both novels, girlhood is dominated by the threat of sexual assault and the existence of rape culture, especially in a digital age and #MeToo movement. In post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, critics have noted a rise in YA literature, especially female authors addressing “uncomfortable but important matters in their works”, including “violence against teenage girls and women in Ireland” (Seijas-Pérez 66). YA, or young adult, literature is usually classified by the inclusion of “at least one teenage protagonist, is preoccupied with adolescent desires, anxieties, and scenarios, and is widely marketed . . . for 12-18 year olds” (Kennon 134). As YA literature has evolved, it “echoes the liminality and transitional status of adolescence itself” (Kennon 134). Additionally, post-Celtic Tiger Irish fiction has seen a rise in

accountability for past troubles, especially the sexual abuse of children and representations of female desire (Wills 295).

Both protagonists in these novels, the Girl in *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* and Emma in *Asking for It*, experience sexual assault. *Asking For It* is loosely based on widely publicised cases, including the Steubenville case of 2012, in which an unconscious girl is raped over the course of several hours at a party in the US (Macur and Schweber), as well as the Slane Girl case in Ireland, where a young woman was pictured performing oral sex at an Eminem concert (Foy). Emma is gang-raped by a group of boys at a house party, many of whom are star players of the county’s Gaelic football team, a similarity to the Steubenville case in America. Meanwhile, the Girl in *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, who remains unnamed for the entirety of the novel, beginning when she is just thirteen is repeatedly raped by her uncle, known only as Uncle or ‘him’. McBride’s novel illustrates the space that has become available in the twenty-first century to engage with the realities of girlhood in 1990s Ireland, with women’s writing gaining the “increased visibility, publication, public discourse, and grassroots activism around women’s reproductive rights . . . marriage equality, and systematic gender biases in literary, cultural, and political institutions” (Kennon 133). By placing the reader directly in the protagonist’s consciousness, both authors reflect the post-Celtic Tiger era’s “marked increase in registering trauma and vulnerability within the contemporary moment”, thus better reflecting adolescent girls’ lived realities (Cahill 158). The Girl exists in an Ireland that condemns female sexuality and conforms to the teachings of the Catholic Church. Yet the Girl’s experience of girlhood mirrors Emma’s as they both experience sexual assault at the hands of those with more power, and they are both ridiculed and blamed. The reactions of the local community, close friends, and family to both of these young girls’ experiences of sexual assault are symptomatic of the broader Irish response to trauma.

## 2. *A GIRL IS A HALF-FORMED THING*

*A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* is set in an unnamed place or time period, although it is suggested to take place in the 1980s to 1990s (Cahill 159). None of the characters are given names; instead, they are identified through pronouns: “I” and “me” for the Girl, “you” for her older brother, “him” for her uncle, and so forth. McBride uses a stream of consciousness style of writing, which plunges the reader into the consciousness of the protagonist, enabling us to live her experiences with her, from the womb to adolescence.

She first met her uncle at the age of thirteen, when he and his wife came to the Girl's house to stay for a week. Around this time, concerns arose about the cognitive ability of her brother, as the brain tumour he had suffered as an infant continued to affect him. The Girl is very protective of her brother, having violent outbursts at anyone who suggests he is different. When she overhears her aunt and uncle asking her mother why he is in the same school as her and not a specialised school, the Girl is furious and screams at them.

This, however, brings her to the attention of her uncle, whom she has already noticed looking at her repeatedly since his arrival. The attention he gives her results in the Girl thinking she has feelings of “lust” for him, “Is lust it? That’s it”, and she ignores his presence for the remainder of their stay (McBride, *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* 51). The Girl is just thirteen at this point, a child, who is “never in a position to truly consent, as children do not sufficiently grasp the scope and understanding of the meaning and implications of sexuality” (Reynaert 191). Towards the end of their stay, the Girl's mother, brother and aunt go out to the shops, leaving her and her uncle alone in the house. This is where the sexual abuse begins: “His touch my face with flat of hand. You are. Oh you’re a strange one . . . and do you know there’s no one home?” (McBride, *A Girl* 53). The uncle knows they are alone when he does this, taking complete advantage of the Girl's age and innocence. There is a stark power imbalance between the Girl and her uncle, which he uses to his own advantage. By using his power to take control over the Girl, his sexual abuse also “has a lasting impact on the body”, affecting her relationship with sex and her own body (Reynaert 192): “Let him kiss me. If he wants . . . He. Turns my face to him. Dissolving fright under his hands. He put his mouth on mine. This is kiss to me” (McBride, *A Girl* 53). Her “dissolving fright” betrays her young age and utter lack of power in this situation. Additionally, her language reiterates that this is her first sexual experience, her first kiss. She has no means of consenting or truly understanding what is happening to her. Her uncle knows this, too, and takes advantage of the situation, telling her that he is “honoured” to be her first kiss (McBride, *A Girl* 53).

The Girl's obsession with washing and being clean comes into play after this interaction. She goes to the lake for “[s]torage I think. Cleaning and cold storage. I will gush myself out between my legs. Whoever let the poison in. The dirt retreat . . . I will put my head in for discreet baptise” (McBride, *A Girl* 55). Allusions to religion reoccur throughout the novel, starting with the Girl destroying a statue of the Virgin Mary when her mother mentions her brother's cognitive state. The Girl embraces religious language

in response to her sexual abuse, seeking not only bodily cleansing in the lake but also purity in the religious language her mother uses throughout her lifetime. The Girl's religious upbringing echoes that of the Irish state and the Catholic Church throughout the twentieth century, as "Ireland's ultra-Catholic stance on sexuality was justified through claims that certain people, groups, and beliefs . . . morally endanger people, groups, and beliefs", such as impure women endangering pure women (Backus and Valente 423). Her uncle's sexual abuse causes the Girl to believe that she has sinned, as she has learnt from a young age that the female body is inherently sinful. Therefore, her devotion to prayer ensures that she will "be pure" (McBride 52). This brings to mind Eimear McBride's distinction between shame and guilt, as she defines guilt as the individual "recognising and regretting their transgression", whereas shame "comes about when the individual has cause to regret not only what they have done but who they, fundamentally, are" (McBride, *Something Out of Place* 57). The Girl is literally and metaphorically quietened as a young child, reinforcing the religious notion that the female body, and the female person, is shameful and silent.

The sexual abuse only continues from then on, now that her uncle has gotten away with a kiss. When the Girl returns from washing herself in the lake, everyone is asleep upstairs. The narrative changes in tone when her uncle wakes up and goes downstairs to the Girl: "I know that vicious look of him to me now. And the usual inner throb in me" (McBride, *A Girl* 57). Her uncle sees the Girl in her wet clothes and rapes her. The narrative is difficult to read, as the reader remains within the Girl's consciousness throughout. She emphasises that the experience is "[t]oo much . . . Too much so much. It. Is too much then" (McBride, *A Girl* 58); she cannot fully process what is happening, a symptom of trauma. Her uncle ignores her attempts to break free from him, even as she makes him bleed with her nails, refusing any semblance of consent or control on the part of the Girl: "I cannot take this. Pain. Scratch him. Pain of it. Keep clawing at his skin. He does not. Does not know this" (McBride, *A Girl* 58). The already fragmented narrative style becomes even more so during this scene, something that McBride repeats later in the novel. The Girl does not see her uncle for a few years after this, but the assault has a lasting impact on her. As Shadia Abdel-Rahman Téllez writes, "the traumatic impact of sexual abuse is absorbed in the Girl's embodied identity, which was already half-formed due to the social and religious constructions of femininity and is totally disintegrated with this first experience of sexual violence" (6). At age fifteen, the Girl uses sex as a means

of protecting her brother from bullying throughout her time in school: “He was the first off. Worst off. I begin. Now I know full well what I can do. For me and for you” (McBride, *A Girl* 70). According to Susan Cahill, “sex becomes about momentary assertions of power and sustained self-harm, completely devoid of any expression of pleasure” (159). Clair Wills describes the Girl’s “desire for sexual debasement” as “an inevitable consequence of the violence” she has experienced with her family and the Church (299). The Girl does not have a choice in her reaction to her trauma; her girlhood has been defined by violence and abuse, from her mother, uncle, and the influence of religion in her life. Her use of sex to protect her brother continues throughout the rest of her time at school as well as when she moves away for college: “In the new world I am do this every single time I can” (McBride, *A Girl* 89).

Crucially, the Girl attempts to take back power from her uncle when they meet for the first time in five years, when she is eighteen. Her uncle admires her looks now that she has grown up: “You’ve grown so much. You’ve grown up. You’re a woman now . . . And beautiful” (McBride, *A Girl* 106). They finally confront each other about the Girl’s sexual assault later that day, when her uncle mentions that he often thinks about what happened: “So are you feeling guilty? . . . I feel guilty and I am. Because I was thirteen? Look you’re no baby now” (McBride, *A Girl* 106-107). He attempts to place some responsibility on her, suggesting that she consented to the assault. Her reaction places fear in the uncle, and he questions the Girl on her feelings about what happened: “You don’t think do you that. What? I abused you?” (McBride 107). Although he feels guilty, the uncle denies any wrongdoing; he does not believe that he abused the Girl, despite her young age. She expresses her young age to him, highlighting that “[a]t thirteen after all [she] was still a child” (McBride, *A Girl* 107). Her refusal to accept his words and to reiterate her young age to him demonstrates the Girl’s position of power here, as she is the only one who is able to make her uncle feel guilty for his actions. Up until this point, the Girl has internalised her trauma, continuing the narrative that rape is an individual rather than political problem (Altrows 5). As described by Orlaith Darling, the Girl “endeavours to appropriate what is happening to her by projecting it back onto her uncle” (313). This occurs again when the Girl asks her uncle to beat her, thus filling him “with. [Her] pain” (McBride, *A Girl* 58).

When the Girl’s brother dies of brain cancer, she abandons any sense of self-preservation she has had until this point. Chu He analyses the conflicting instincts to

respond to trauma, the death drive and life drive, in which the traumatised maintain their survival instincts (71). The Girl's response is to flee to the lake, where she is raped by a man she had sex with days earlier. The text here is completely fragmented, mirroring her state of mind and lack of power in the situation. According to Elaine Scarry and analysed further by Téllez, trauma is "language destroying" (7). The Girl struggles to comprehend what is happening to her, signified by McBride's decision to incorporate misspelled words and incomplete sentences: "Soon I'n dead I'm sre. Loose. Ver the aIrWays. Here. mY nose my mOuth I. VOMit. Clear. Clear" (McBride, *A Girl* 194). When she makes it back home, the Girl's mother is furious, demonstrating the lack of awareness of abuse and the Irish tradition of staying quiet: "Have you no shame?" (McBride, *A Girl* 195). Her mother's retort here further highlights the Girl's sense of shame in this moment, as according to Ahmed, "the bind of shame is that it is intensified by being seen by others as shame" (103). Therefore, her initial humiliation at having been raped is doubly felt due to her mother's exposure of it, causing the Girl to retreat inward. Additionally, Darling points out that Irish society "interprets the permeability of Girl's body not as violence done to her, but as sin on her part" (311). Nicole Fayard writes that the shame of rape is "closely associate[d] with . . . a discourse of discipline and punishment for the victim (rather than for the rapists)", therefore the victim is degraded and discarded "from . . . civilised society" (40). The Girl reverts here to her earlier need for cleanliness and the religious affiliation with water. She returns to the lake, with the intention to "strip pain all parts of [her]" (McBride, *A Girl* 202). Actions such as washing, self-harm, and suicide attempts are all "withdrawal strategies as the victim attempts to defend herself against shame and regain some control" (Fayard 41). However, this final assault and her mother's awareness of the Girl's shame become too much for her to bear, and her washing becomes a suicide attempt. The novel ends with her drowning in the lake, returning to her brother, where they will "live a thousand Lir years", finally freeing the Girl from her abuse and trauma (McBride, *A Girl* 203). This bleak ending serves as an illustration of the impossibility for the teenage girl to live in contemporary Ireland without fear of abuse, whether that is the 1990s that the Girl inhabits, or the present day during which McBride wrote this ending.

### 3. *ASKING FOR IT*

*Asking For It* follows eighteen-year-old Emma, a fifth-year student from Ballinacorney in Co. Cork. The reader is immediately introduced to Emma's personality and her friend group, in which appearances matter more than anything else. Rape culture is normalised in Emma's world, as she and her friend group make sexual jokes about their classmates and each other. For example, one girl in their school is nicknamed "Sarah Swallows", and they consistently make comments about each other's sexual history. Emma's friend Jamie, for instance, pokes fun at Emma's promiscuity: "[y]ou've been with everyone else. It's hard to keep track" (O'Neill 38). One of the boys, Dylan, who later gang-rapes Emma, summarises the actions of the girls in their year, explaining that girls "get wasted and get a bit slutty, then in the morning try and pretend it never happened because you regret it" (O'Neill 30). Rape culture is defined as "the cultural practices that reproduce and justify the perpetration of sexual violence" (Rentschler 67). This provides context to girlhood in contemporary Ireland within this novel, as the reader is clearly introduced to the ways in which rape culture has embedded itself in the day-to-day life of these teenagers. This is clearly at play here, as the girls make jokes about rape and promiscuity without thinking twice about the consequences of their words. Early in the narrative, it is revealed that Emma convinces her friend Jamie not to report her rape as "it's easier not to make a fuss", pointing out that she "didn't say no" (O'Neill 92). O'Neill uses brackets and italics to portray Emma's feelings throughout the novel, juxtaposing descriptions of scenes with Emma's thoughts. This becomes important during later scenes, as the reader experiences Emma's assault with her, including her lack of memory surrounding it and the horror of finding out what happened that night when she does.

On the day that she is brutally gang-raped, Emma hosts a house party since her parents are away in Killarney for the night, inviting her own friends as well as her brother Bryan's friends and girlfriend. Emma makes sure not to eat before the party so that any alcohol she drinks will quickly affect her, explaining that "eating is cheating" when her brother questions her on it (O'Neill 60). After a couple of drinks, the group goes to another house party, driven by Fitzy despite the fact that he has also been drinking. At this house, the captain of the Gaelic football team, Paul O'Brien, is present, and Emma wastes no time in flirting with him. She accepts a drug from him, in defiance of her own fear, as she is "sick of people thinking they know" her (O'Neill 98). O'Neill's writing begins to echo McBride's writing when the drug kicks into Emma's system, as she uses italics and brackets to portray Emma's state of mind. The text mimics the incoherence of

the Girl's stream of consciousness when Emma is raped later in the novel: "*All I am made of is soft*" (O'Neill 103); "I can feel the music trickling out of my feet" (O'Neill 104). Emma's vulnerability allows the four boys to take advantage of her. They consider ringing her parents and bringing her home, but that thought quickly fades when Emma kisses Paul and brings him to a bedroom. However, even while intoxicated, Emma quickly changes her mind, suggesting to Paul that they should return to the party, before giving up, thinking: "I don't know if there's any point in stopping him now" (O'Neill 108). Afterwards, they exchange numbers, but Paul's friends, Dylan and Sean, stumble into the bedroom, at which point Paul admits to unlocking the bedroom door. Paul greets his friends by pulling Emma from the bed to show her off: "'Ah, you're too hot not to show you off' He grabs my arm and pulls me up to standing. 'Look at her'" (O'Neill 112). The three boys offer Emma more drugs, which she takes again in defiance of her perceived reputation of being "boring, and traditional, and a good girl" (O'Neill 114). At this point, the narrative ends, the next chapter taking place the following day, symbolising Emma's loss of memory beyond this point.

Emma's loss of memory during the rape, partly due to the amount of alcohol and drugs she had taken, results in her finding out the extent of what had happened to her afterwards, at school on Monday and on Facebook. She has no memory of having had sex with anyone until her friends refuse to sit with her during Irish class and explain why when Emma confronts them after the lesson: "You are absolutely disgusting, do you know that? Four guys in one night? Do you have any fucking self-respect, Emma?" (O'Neill 132). Cathy Caruth's and Sigmund Freud's definitions of trauma both highlight the loss of memory during the trauma itself, as it is "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (Caruth 4). O'Neill's use of brackets and italics to fill the narrative with both description and Emma's thoughts and feelings, helps the reader experience the trauma with her, as it "imposes itself again", and highlights her lack of memory (Caruth 4). Her classmates' reactions to the gang-rape place the blame completely on Emma. She is met with the repeated phrase "*slut, liar, skank, bitch, whore*" throughout the day as she begins to piece together the events of the house party (O'Neill 138). She overhears some girls say that "she was fucking asking for it" and that she handed herself "to him on a plate" (O'Neill 154). Emma forces herself to react to the pictures and videos posted on Facebook in the third person:

Dylan on top of that girl (*me, me, that can't be me, that's not me*) his hands over the (*my – no, her*) face, as if to cover her up. She has no face. She is just a body, a life-sized doll to play with. / She is an It. She is a thing. (*me, me, me, me, me*). (O’Neill 146)

Memories of her mother and the boys involved are mingled with descriptions of the images and videos, allowing Emma some relief from the trauma as she is re-experiencing it. At home, Emma discovers bruising “beneath the sunburn . . . blossoming around my neck and hips” (O’Neill 143). Her brother and mother air their disappointment in her, while her father avoids making eye contact with her and does not do so until the end of the novel. Emma’s response is to disassociate completely from her body, referring to herself as “*a collection of body parts*” (O’Neill 157), as her body is “not [her] own any more” (O’Neill 161). This is true literally and figuratively, as the boys involved in the rape literally used her body for their own pleasure, and her body becomes figuratively not her own when Emma takes a case against the boys, thus becoming the Ballinatoon Girl. The boys humiliate her further by urinating on her unconscious body. Emma can no longer look at herself in the same way in the aftermath of the house party, repeating only what she saw in the photos: “(Legs spread apart) (Pink flesh)” (O’Neill 167). Emma’s body and sense of self have become fragmented, leaving her with “the shame imposed by the mirror of social media” as it “ruthlessly breaks down Emma’s sense of self and identity” (Hickey 66). This sense of shame and fragmentation is heightened when you consider that “she does not remember the events her only knowledge of them is through the lens of photos” (Hickey 66). Emma also cannot say the word rape in reference to her own experience, further highlighting her fragmented self. She tries to convince herself and others that it was all a joke, until a teacher finally tells her that she was raped: “Rape. / It is like a whip cracking against my spine. / The word fills the room, until there’s nothing left, and all I can breathe is that word (rape) and all I can smell is that word (rape) and all I can taste is that word (rape)” (O’Neill 168). Again, O’Neill uses brackets here to draw attention to the words left unsaid but that cannot be forgotten, as Emma is forced to come to terms with her trauma for the first time.

The second half of the novel is set a year later, during which we clearly see the reactions of the community and Emma’s family and friends. O’Neill’s decision to show the aftermath of Emma’s rape differs from other YA fiction discussing similar topics. Aiyana Altrows points out that “one of the most commonly recurring harmful scripts in YA rape fiction” is called “the silent victim script in which the victim is unable to disclose

her rape and spends the novel agonizing over this”, which usually ends with the victim speaking out about their rape, finishing with hope for the future of the victim (2). O’Neill, however, decides to highlight the realities of coming forward in Irish society, in which the perpetrator is given more support than the victim. The decision to report her rape significantly affects Emma’s mental health. Emma, who has attempted suicide twice at this point in the novel, has become seriously depressed with thoughts of self-harm and suicide ideation:

The first time I tried I was in my bedroom . . . I take a towel and I place it underneath me. I don’t want to make a mess . . . [Bryan] held my hand, bandages covering the new tattoos on my wrists . . . We went home, and we didn’t talk about it again. (Until the next time.) (O’Neill 262-263)

The silence surrounding Emma’s suicide attempt coincides with the tradition of silence about difficult issues in Ireland. This novel is one of the many works that are now beginning to break through this veil of silence. Her second suicide attempt illustrates the disconnection from herself, suggesting symptoms of dissociation in response to trauma. This second attempt also puts Emma under further scrutiny from the community: “After the second time I tried, people around town said I didn’t really mean to do it, that I was looking for attention. I don’t think that was the reason. I think I just wanted some silence. But I don’t know” (O’Neill 233). The repetition of “think” and “I don’t know” reinforces Emma’s helplessness in the situation, both during her rape and in the aftermath of speaking up about it.

There is little to no support for Emma as a victim, with the exception of some counselling for her depression, and her parents’ inability to talk with her about her rape. Although Emma has spoken up about her rape, the community’s protection of her perpetrators and her parents’ silence leave Emma isolated and silent, as if she had never spoken out about what happened. Emma’s isolation, then, results in depression and self-harm, as “physical self-harm becomes another punishment incurred by the silent victim that reflects and intensifies the victim’s psychological torment” (Altrows 9). As Jennifer Mooney attests, “Emma’s parents are stoically inept at engaging Emma in direct discussion about her sexual assault” (96). Her mother has taken over her care, providing Emma with her medication and sleeping tablets each night, and keeps the medicine cupboard under lock and key: “I stick out my tongue. I have to show her my intent to get better, my promise not to be foolish again” (O’Neill 192). However, Emma’s parents are

uncomfortable discussing her mental health and the events at the party. Emma’s mother has given up on her previous efforts to look beautiful at all times, no longer wearing make-up, as well as drinking more frequently. She hides her excessive drinking from Emma’s father, “hiding her glass behind the kettle” when he enters the room, and quickly making her way through bottles of wine during dinner (O’Neill 237). Her father has become distant, going to work early and returning home late, all the while avoiding direct eye contact with his daughter.

Additionally, Emma’s preoccupation about her appearance has vanished, along with her social life and desire to be well-liked and admired by everyone: “(*when was the last time you brushed your hair, Emma?*)” (O’Neill 184). There are clear similarities to the Steubenville case and the Slane Girl from this point on, as Emma’s rape has become a national story. The public, at least from Emma’s perspective, shows sympathy for the boys’ “ruined” lives: “They cannot use their names either, for legal reasons, but everyone knows who they are. Their lives are ruined because of this. I have ruined them” (O’Neill 186). The boys involved walk freely around the village, using their freedom as a means to intimidate Emma. In one particular scene, Paul’s friends aggressively bump into her, responding to the interaction with “[c]areful, Timmy, she’ll probably say you raped her too” (O’Neill 195). Paul stays on the other side of the road as he is not allowed within a certain distance of Emma while the case is being examined. Meanwhile, other members of the community “talk to [her] mother in hushed tones, asking about the court case, the chances of prosecution” (O’Neill 204). Emma’s mother and brother are her only source of support, the rest of Ballinacorney seemingly supporting the boys who raped her, assuming that she has made up her rape to ruin their lives, or that it was her fault in the first place as she put herself in that position.

In terms of the legal repercussions of the case against Paul and the other boys, they each get legal representation and the “case will be on their permanent record forever” (O’Neill 226). It could take another two years for the case to go on trial, and Emma is not allowed separate legal representation “under Irish law” (O’Neill 224). Instead, “the DPP . . . will bring the accused to court and prosecute on behalf of the state”, unless there is an application to “bring up Emma’s sexual history” (O’Neill 224). The solicitor her parents contact for legal advice also mentions that it is “a shame that Emma was over eighteen at the time”, as the possession and distribution of paedophilic images is much “easier to prove than the issue of consent” (O’Neill 227). This serves, as Cahill describes,

as “a chilling reminder of the narrowness of our culture and legal system’s conception of what constitutes such an act, because Ireland has no legal definition of consent” (164). The Irish legal system ensures the victims of rape are liars “until . . . proven honest”, while the rapists are “innocent until proven guilty” (O’Neill 292). Her classmates post photos on Facebook wearing t-shirts with #TeamPaul, #TeamSean, #TeamDylan printed on them to show their support for the boys. The reaction of Emma’s immediate circle and wider community, paired with the difficulty of bringing such a case to trial, all culminates in Emma eventually withdrawing her complaint. She “didn’t want to ruin anyone’s life” and feels that if she had not made “a fuss, . . . everything would have gone back to normal” (O’Neill 318). However, it is important to note that as she announces her decision to her parents, she waits for her parents to tell her not to withdraw her complaint: “I hesitate, waiting, waiting for my mother or my father to rush in and tell me not to be silly, that of course I’ll win, that I have to win because I’m innocent in this, because I am the victim, because this wasn’t my fault” (O’Neill 319). Instead, her parents support her decision, her father looking at her for the first time since she was raped, and her mother saying that “they’re good boys really. This all just got out of hand” (O’Neill 324). The ending of the novel encapsulates the reality of being raped in Ireland and the difficulties in attempting to get justice for that crime; the victim is scrutinised and assumed to be lying, while the rapists are praised for coming from good families and just making a mistake that will not happen again.<sup>2</sup> The novel ends with Emma “dragging [her] mouth into a smile” and pretending to be normal, as is expected of her now that she has finished playing the victim in her own rape (O’Neill 340).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The reality of girlhood in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland as represented in these novels portrays feminist, independent and confident girls, who are comfortable in their own sexuality. However, these girls are inevitably traumatised by the pervading patriarchal society in which these novels are set, that only forgives obedient and quiet girls. Girls are constructed as “‘empowered’ yet heavily constrained through the reinvigorated

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<sup>2</sup> The Dublin Rape Crisis Centre reported a “significant increase in the number of people prosecuted for rape in Ireland in 2020”, although the actual number going to court is still very small and is only a fraction of what is reported to the Gardaí (DRCC, “Higher Prosecutions for Rape”). More recently, the DRCC received a record number of contacts to their helpline in 2025, although they believe this is still only a “fraction of the thousands . . . who have not yet sought [their] support”, with the reporting rate at just “27%” (DRCC, “Record Number of Contacts”).

regulatory force of an (over) ‘emphasised’ and ‘good’ femininity” (Cahill 165). Both the Girl and Emma give in to the patriarchal forces surrounding them. The Girl commits suicide in the lake where she had initially found comfort from her trauma, thus removing herself completely from the unfair society she lives in, while Emma withdraws her complaint against her rapists, hoping to secure her family a normal, quiet life, accepting her shame and trauma alone. The attention given to both protagonists, as the authors utilise first person narration in both texts, highlights the development of YA literature focused on girlhood. The Girl and Emma both “challenge dominant representations of the girl in the Tiger period”, bringing attention to rape culture and its normalised position for girls in contemporary Ireland (Cahill 155). They also demonstrate the futility of speaking out, as the Girl is shamed by her mother for her sexual abuse, placing the blame solely on the Girl and her apparent promiscuity. Similarly, the community of Ballinacorney supports the four perpetrators rather than Emma, utilising social media to publicly show their support for the abusers over the victim. Neither novel has a positive ending, as both protagonists are forced back into silent victims in a patriarchal society, illustrating the lived realities of many Irish adolescents who experience similar traumas to those in McBride’s and O’Neill’s narratives.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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