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GENDER RELATIONS AND FEMALE AGENCY IN CLAIRE KEEGAN'S *ANTARCTICA*[1]

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ABSTRACT

Claire Keegan is one of the most prominent voices within the contemporary Irish short story panorama. Internationally acclaimed, her prose has been praised for its frank and bitter portrayal of a rural world, whose outdated values, no matter how anchored in the past they might be, still prevail in a modern milieu. Keegan's unsympathetic views on society, mainly on the Catholic Church and the family, are the main targets of her harsh criticism. Issues like gender and sexuality, two social constructs with which to validate an uneven distribution of power, constitute the pillars of most of her plots. Bearing these aspects in mind, my proposal focuses on the analysis of Keegan's first collection of short stories, *Antarctica* (1999), in light of gender relations and female agency, in an attempt to find patterns of – often thwarted – female emancipation in the context of the rapid changes of a society that is still adjusting to a globalised world. This article will also engage in the discussion of her second collection, *Walk the Blue Fields* (2007), and her long short story *Foster* (2010).

Keywords: Claire Keegan; short story; gender construction; identity; marriage; rural world; female agency.

1. Introduction

Claire Keegan is probably one of the most enigmatic writers in the Irish contemporary panorama. With a relatively small but prominent literary output, she has been acclaimed internationally and has been awarded many literary prizes.[3] Her work has been the subject of considerable scrutiny in the last years

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3 Such as the William Trevor Prize, the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature, the Olive Cook Award, the Edge Hill Prize for Short Stories, the Martin Healy Prize, and the Davy Byrnes

and she has been interviewed by a good number of scholars and journalists. However, she maintains a low profile, keeping distant from critics and academics, and reducing her public appearances to a minimum. At present, she devotes her time to teaching and writing, mainly short narratives, a genre in which she has excelled. Her remarkable literary gifts, her extremely precise language, and her masterful use of the short story form were soon evinced when her debut collection, *Antarctica* (1999), came out and were confirmed years later with both the publication of her second collection, *Walk the Blue Fields* (2007), and her long short story, *Foster* (2010).[4] Her style, her exploration of human relations and her literary interests have been compared to those of John McGahern, Flannery O'Connor, Anthony Chéjov, Benedict Kiely, Raymond Carver, Sebastian Barry, James Joyce and William Trevor (Hunt Mahony 2002; Enright 2007; Harte 2007; Newton 2008; Fitzgerald-Hoyt 2015: 279; Valvano Lynch 2015: 132; D'hoker 2016: 160). Although literary reviews of her work abound in newspapers and academic journals worldwide, full-length studies or scholarly articles that thoroughly explore her work have been significantly scant.

A striking feature in Keegan's work is her blending of tradition and superstition with modernity, in such a way that boundaries are blurred, and the reader is left confused with the characters' temporal dimension. Even though the majority of her stories are set in a contemporary world, the lives portrayed appear outdated and are located in unsympathetic rural milieus that offer limited possibilities for women; an appreciation shared by most critics. While Mary Fitzgerald-Hoyt claims that Keegan's fiction uncovers a "process of re-inventing rural Ireland" (Fitzgerald-Hoyt 2015: 281), Anne Enright affirms that she "takes the clichés of Irish rural life and sets them ablaze" (Enright 2007), and Alfred Markey adds that, in the case of *Walk the Blue Fields*, the world depicted "seems much at odds with the new Ireland" of the Celtic tiger (Markey 2010: 94). All in all, as Elke D'hoker argues, her stories "feature outlying family farms, village priests, hard-working mothers and feckless fathers. Only small, sly details reveal that this is not mid-twentieth-century Ireland …, but the Ireland of the 1990s, in which people have avocado starters at a wedding, … and a Chinaman in a caravan rivals the local priest" (D'hoker 2016: 160). The result is, in Heather Ingman's words, "a timelessness that is belied by the new twists Keegan brings to them" (Ingman 2018: 291).

Interestingly, Keegan's work is a product of the late 1990s, a historical breakthrough for the Irish society, impelled by profound changes in legislation

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Irish Writing Award, among some others. Her work has been translated into seventeen languages.

4 Although formally *Foster* has the appearance of a novella and has been published in book format, Keegan has preferred to refer to it as a "long short story" (O'Hagan 2010; Morales-Ladrón 2011). She is also the author of the less known short story "Salt: The Second Chapter" (2002), published independently.

that decriminalised homosexuality and turned the "natural" union between a man and a woman into a contract that could be broken through a divorce. Such transformations were the source of much debate in the literature produced in Ireland around the time:

> The 1990s was a boom period for the Irish novel as a group of young Irish novelists came to the fore to create an entirely new agenda... concerned with the body as it is linked to a grid of power that is partly preestablished and partly rapidly changing in contemporary Ireland. For several of these novels the demarcating line of identity – that perennial Irish problem – can be gauged at the basic level of sexual and gender identity in contrast to or in alliance with political, social, religious, or cultural norms.
>
> (Jeffers 2002: 1)

Even though Keegan's stories touch upon the themes of incest, gender violence, and parental abuse in a post 90s society, most of them reflect on long-established unequal roles defined by nuclear family configurations that remain uncontested by the supremacy of a patriarchal order. Furthermore, without exception, they revolve around heterosexual normative societies, trapped in what Judith Butler has defined as "the heterosexual matrix" (Butler 1990: 51). This was the legal option in Ireland until the 1990s, when the secularisation of society and the equation of family with marriage and motherhood started to be defied. Besides, her attempt to challenge social gender constructions through subversive performative acts – in truth, ineffectual role reversals – surface as the product of the same binary system and transform into an outmoded option. Contrarily, writers of her generation have been more concerned with the possibilities and limitations brought about by the Celtic Tiger times and with the destabilisation of sex and gender identity through the dissolving of hegemonic heterosexual relationships. As Jeffers adds, "the social and political context of the 90s contrasts with the stereotype of Ireland. Economics, politics, sexual preference, and lifestyle choices in Ireland in the 1990s are a reflection of greater European and global awareness. In the Republic of Ireland, signs of self-satisfaction were beginning to emerge in the 1990s" (Jeffers 2002: 178).

If it is true that Keegan's prose has been outlined for the bitter rendering of imbalanced gender relations governed by old-fashioned values anchored in the past (O'Hagan 2010; Morales-Ladrón 2011; Luppino 2014: 1), her gruelling views on marriage as the icon of the family transpire as the main targets of her harsh criticism. In her literary realm, relationships are not only defined by a deep-seated binary patriarchal structure that subordinates women, but also couples are emotionally disabled, with men and women inhabiting two irreconcilable worlds within which children find no space for balanced growth. In this context, issues of gender and sexuality, two social constructs with which to validate an uneven

distribution of power, constitute the pillars of most of her plots. Bearing these aspects in mind, along the lines of the present discussion, I intend to examine Keegan's literary portrayal of gender relations and female agency in her first collection of short stories, *Antarctica*, while further connections to *Walk the Blue Fields* and *Foster* will also be addressed. My contention is that, in these narratives, most of the female characters are disempowered subjects, in spite of their struggles to turn their conservative milieus upside down. The few women who exert certain agency do it through subversive acts that society and pre-Butler criticism on gender performativity would validate as futile role reversals. These, in turn, only allow them to temporarily transcend the patriarchal order to eventually end up engulfed by the same biased gendered system. Not surprisingly, *Antarctica* has been described as "a fierce collection full of sharp reversals of fortune" (Rahim 2010).

2. Claire Keegan's divisive universe in *Antarctica*

While the majority of the stories in *Walk the Blue Fields* and *Foster* are set in rural Ireland, *Antarctica* explores a wider world, inhabited by characters that seem to be at odds with their environment. Regardless of the diversity of settings, which include the USA, England, and Ireland, and of the issues addressed, ranging from loss, lack of love, unfulfilled desire, neglect, sexual awakening or the search for home, the stories of *Antarctica* delve into the impossibility of bonding. In narrative terms, the collection is focalised by first- and third-person narrators, and offers a wide spectrum of adult, young, male and female voices. The common denominator is the unpredicted and discomforting inconclusive endings, which create a sense of imminent menace, of an inevitable tragedy that will often flout the reader's expectations. In Keegan's universe, nothing can be taken for granted and, in an interview, she has affirmed that the short story form suits her character because it abounds in

> a lack of excess. In a short story you tell as little as you dare and, within a very tight piece of space, do a U-turn … suggesting a great deal more and trusting and putting your faith in the reader's intelligence and explaining nothing, analysing nothing and summarising nothing.
>
> (Morales-Ladrón 2011)

Antarctica thus stands as a collection of stories that portray a lopsided world segregated by gender and unscathed by the effects of a modern ethos, where the gulf that separates men from women becomes an instrument for male control and power. Yet, following Butler, gender is a construction that needs to be performed:

> *gender* is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes... the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence, within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing. (Butler 1990: 24–25)

To the performative representation of gender Sylvie Mikowski adds that of patriarchy and considers that the "constructed status of patriarchy and gender roles in general... far from being natural, need to rely on the enforcement of written laws, the setting-up of particular rituals and the display of certain signs" (Mikowski 2010: 111). Based on these ideas, the present analysis will provide a tentative classification of the gender performativity of the female characters that inhabit Keegan's stories with a view to propose that, from the more liberal to the more conventional, none can escape from a web of equally curtailed choices in a male-oriented society. This assumption contrasts with Fitzgerald-Hoyt's defence of the female characters in Keegan's collection, who "may inhabit recognizable predicaments, but they sidestep categorization, elude easy definition. Fiercely independent, resolutely un-selfpitying, they refuse to submit and thus become agents of their own survival" (Fitzgerald-Hoyt 2015: 182–183).

Contrary to this view, I will contend that the plots in *Antarctica* can be separated into three different groups: stories of girlhood, whose awakening process triggers a refusal to validate the imbalanced distribution of gender roles and, in some cases, leads to a confrontation with their submissive and sacrificing mothers; stories that portray sexually liberated agentive women, whose empowerment manifests in the control exerted on their bodies, though with thwarted outcomes; and stories of females trapped in unsatisfying relationships shaped by the social expectations of a binary gender distribution. Of the fifteen stories in *Antarctica*, there is only one, "Burns", which pictures a contented couple, and four others, "Where the Water's Deepest", "The Scent of Winter", "You Can't Be Too Careful" and "The Burning Palms", in which dysfunctional family relations are merely hinted at. "Burns" revolves around a family re-configuration. It portrays a recently formed family unit of three children and a new wife, "Robin" – a symbolical name that resonates with the meaning of "renewal" – who brings about peace to the previous trouble and disgrace for the father and children. In "Where the Water's Deepest", a couple merely stands as such and is never seen as two gendered subjects. "A Scent of Winter" is a dark story dealing with rape, violence, and racism, very much in tune with "You Can't Be Too Careful", on parental abuse, domestic violence, and murder. Finally, "The Burning Palms" is another dramatic story of love, pain, and grief in which the reader is confronted with the struggle of a boy who has to nurse his grandmother after the violent death of his mother in an accident.

2.1. *Stories of girlhood*

Four stories in *Antarctica* are narrated by young female characters, whose process of awakening, either sexual or emotional, together with subtle acts of rebellion against their self-sacrificing mothers, constitute the first group. In "The Ginger Rogers Sermon", which is set in the countryside, the protagonist is described as a girl who enjoys working with the men on the farm, while she is not allowed to go to the Saturday dance with her parents and brother, being still a child. The boredom of having to stay at home watching TV on her own initiates her into the exploration of her own body: "I turn off all the lights and sit with my feet up and play with myself in the dark and hope the actors take off every stitch and go skinny-dipping in the close-up" (*Antarctica*, 50).[5] However, her incipient sexual curiosity only puts her in danger after she has her first period, is sexualised in the eyes of the adults and, therefore, a temptation for the men. It is at this point that she is not allowed to work with them anymore or to mingle with boys at school, where women are somehow "forbidden". Her mother's attempt to control her sexual flourishing is reduced to not letting her watch couples kissing, "shielding out that world of romance and men and women touching" (*Antarctica*, 57), while she is, nevertheless, allowed to observe animals coupling. After she witnesses an episode in which a colt is sexually aroused by a mare, her instinct seems to be released and at night she gets into the bed of one of the men who works at the farm and seduces him:

> I go to him, wrapped in my blankets. I pull his bed-clothes down and get in, compounding our warmth. I lie up against his back and breathe on the down of his neck. My hand slides around his waist, feels his hard belly, wanders shyly down through the curls of his pubic hair. I feel him stiffen. I think of the colts. When he turns over, his hands are cold. Big and gentle and precise. "Jesus, Peaches", I hear him whisper as his will subsides.
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> (*Antarctica*, 62)

Although D'hoker interprets this story as the transformation brought by the crossing of "the threshold between childhood and adolescence, between being a child and learning how to behave as a girl" (D'hoker 2013: 195), to me, her sexual awakening is presented as a natural drive that, outside societal rules and expectations, cannot be controlled. The way she handles her impulses, together with her daring attempt to transgress social limits, give her agency. In contrast to Jeffers' assertion that "sex and sexuality constitute an arena of power that is used to create and maintain male domination" (Jeffers 2002: 50), Keegan's protagonist problematises social expectations and engages in a role reversal, with dramatic

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5 Further references will be to the same edition and included in the text between brackets.

consequences. Far from presenting the countryside as the pastoral ideal governed by a balanced order, uncontaminated by modernising liberal mores, nature normalises what society represses. Precisely because "heterosexual structures... at all levels of society promote a certain understanding of masculinity of what it means to be male, and femininity or what it means to be female" (Jeffers 2002: 51), the seduced man, Slapper Jim, finds himself unable to face such transgression and hangs himself the following day. What this story ultimately reveals is that, in Keegan's world, there is no place for innocence, not even in childhood, since sex is reduced to a primary drive common to all animals. At the end of the narrative, when the family comes back home after a funeral, the parents and the two children dance together in the kitchen in a ritual that celebrates shared forbidden knowledge. Her dance with her brother Eugene symbolises her entrance into the adult world, turning her sexual offence into an appropriate act of gender performativity. This is confirmed in the allusive final lines that leave the reader confused and discomforted: "Can I interest you in a snog at the gable wall? and he swings me in a perfect twist" (*Antarctica*, 67).

The second story of *Antarctica* told from the point of view of another young female narrator is "Men and Women". Also set in the Irish countryside, it portrays an estranged family, whose uneven division of gender roles is the source of much tension and dysfunction. Though the protagonist is only a child who defines herself as "the girl of a thousand uses" (*Antarctica*, 120), she is aware of the special treatment her brother receives "so he doesn't open gates or clean up shite or carry buckets. All he does is read and write and draw triangles with special pencils Da buys him for mechanical drawing. He is the brains in the family" (*Antarctica*, 121). Similar to the young protagonist in "The Ginger Roger Sermon", who also noticed how her brother read books while she was kept busy with household chores, these precocious girls are not only aware of their biased gender education, but, furthermore, they realize that this system is perpetuated by women. When the girl complains to her mother that men do nothing, the latter justifies them: "'They are men,' she says, as if this explains everything" (*Antarctica*, 124). However, the girl's aspirations for a fairer family system come to an end at the Christmas Ball, when she is unable to digest her father's promptness to dance with other women, while he requests the assistance of her mother and herself to open gates for him, due to his artificial hips. Her recognition that emptiness rather than affection governs her parents' relationship is manifest when she shows her house to a friend: "This is Mammy's room, and this is Daddy's room,' I said. 'Your parents don't sleep in the same bed?' she said in a voice of pure amazement. And that was when I suspected that our family wasn't normal" (*Antarctica*, 129–130). This notion of normalcy can easily be problematised as it responds to a social construction governed by patriarchal expectations that need to be performed as the result of a tacitly accepted set of rules.

While Ingman has interpreted this story as one that "record[s] the shifting of the balance of power between husband and wife, even in conservative rural families" (Ingman 2018: 291), I contend that it is the girl who agentively confronts her father after she suspects him of having adulterous affairs. Placing herself in between him and the woman with whom he is dancing, she senses "he's helpless, but I don't care. For the first time in my life I have some power. I can butt in and take over, rescue and be rescued" (*Antarctica*, 129). Following Jeffers, who defines power as "the ability to control and regulate" (Jeffers 2002: 50), I argue that such a small empowering act connects and bonds her with her mother, inspiring mimicry. After an embarrassing incident during a raffle at the ball, in which the girl's mother is ridiculed, she follows in her daughter's footsteps and, for the first time, rebels against an oppressive marriage. Refusing to open the gate for her husband, she takes the control of the car. At a time when women did not drive, her act of revenge, of having taken lessons secretly, allows mother and daughter to watch how this disabled man ridiculously stands on the snow, while he clumsily struggles to hold his hat against the wind. The story finally succeeds at representing the female bond as the empowering link that activates the revenge of women against a patriarchal system that tyrannises them. In this case, as in the following one, the child is the one who brings hope and sets the example to follow, triggering her mother's bid to unleash the domestic trap.

The third story that can be included in this category of young agentive female narrators is "The Singing Cashier". In this case, the setting is an English village, where the orphaned protagonist lives with her elder sister Cora in such a chaotic household that she does not even go to school. She describes how the postman delivers the mail every day together with some fish sent by a distant relative, who seems to care for their modest lives. It takes her some time to find out that beyond Cora's invention of excuses to send her away when the postman comes lays an exchange of sexual favours for food. This revelation is simultaneous to the news headlines, "Nightmare on Cromwell Street", announcing the arrest of a "happy couple with the heinous appetite" (*Antarctica*, 81–82). As it emerges, the couple lived in the same street as the girls, had occasionally had supper in their home, and were now responsible for the murder of young women who had appeared buried under the floorboards of their garden.[6] Her awareness of the fact that those young women were her age and that she had been leading an unprotected life prompt her vulnerability:

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[6] Apparently, this story is based on the "Fred West Story", a real case that took place at Cromwell Street in Central Gloucester, England, and which was discovered in 1994. Fred and Rose West were notorious serial killers charged of murdering twelve young women over twenty years, including their own children. See Howard Sounes' study *Fred and Rose* (1995).

> It could have been me. Cora sent me out to run fake errands on what must have been the most dangerous street in England so she could shag a man for the sake of a few fishy parcels. Suddenly I wished Mum was alive. I wish my mother was alive so Cora wouldn't have to mother me, feed me.
>
> (*Antarctica*, 82–83)

At the end of the story, she is the one who mothers Cora, cooks for her and calms her down as she tries to come to terms with the danger they had been exposed to. Analogous to the following story, her awakening experience symbolises her entrance into the adult world, especially after realising that her sister's model was inappropriate and as dysfunctional as that of most of the mothers in Keegan's stories.

Finally, "Storms" touches upon the theme of madness, which is presented as a form of escape from the prison of the wrongs of an imbalanced society. The sacrificing mother of this story, who starts to lose her mind when her own mother dies, confesses that her husband had beaten her up for fifteen years. This recognition comes after acknowledging a dislike for her own daughter due to her having her father's cruel eyes (*Antarctica*, 73). In tone with Keegan's narratives of self-discovery, the girl begins to piece things together and remembers how her sisters – who do not live at home any more – used to go to the dairy where they would "take their dolls and hit their heads on the sloping roof" (*Antarctica*, 74), a likely consequence of having internalised scenes of abuse and violence at home. Her rite of passage, which involves a sudden awareness of her parents' quarrels, results in the performance of a role reversal that prompts her anger: "It's turning out that I'm taking no nonsense from anybody. They leave their wellingtons outside the door now. And I haven't heard them say the spuds are hard in the middle. I'd swat them with the serving spoon. They know that too" (*Antarctica*, 75).

In this story, the mother's splitting of the female bond, through the loss of her mother, the incipient dislike for her daughter and her final failure to recognise her, turns insanity into an escape from oppression. Interned in a "loony bin", when her daughter Ellen visits her on Saturdays, she mistakes her for the beautiful and also powerful Ellen of Troy, suggestively revealing how the girl is perceived by others. Rather than letting herself be carried away by matrophobia, Ellen realises that her mother's insanity had freed her from certain obligations as mother and wife. As a result, she had been allowed to sleep on her own upstairs where she found shelter, putting an end to years of abuse. Not surprisingly, Ellen wonders why she enjoys visiting her mother so much and comes to see that it is her fear of falling into insanity, the result of a natural act of mimicry, that keeps her bond: "I suppose I've my own reasons for going there. Maybe I'm getting used to it. Just a little, taking a small share of it all for my own protection. Like a vaccination. You have to face the worst possible scenario, then you'll be able for anything" (*Antarctica*, 76). Similar to previous narratives of female growth, at

the end of the story the protagonist is ready to step into the adult world, having subverted the inherited submissive female order.

In spite of the different outcomes, these four stories of growth share the young girls' common striving to contest the dictates of a patriarchal system and to revert received assumptions about gender roles and expectations supported by males, yet perpetuated by females. D'hoker adds that these "acts of rebellion... empower the daughter to do differently to the matrilineal heritage with a twist that the daughter takes on" (D'hoker 2013: 198). In Keegan's universe, families do not create nurturing atmospheres where children can grow up healthy and safe. They are rather sites of conflict, inequality, and violence. As the author has declared, "I don't trust that home is necessarily where one finds one's happiness. Families can be awful places, just as they can be glorious and loving. Also, I'm very interested in what we can do without" (O'Hagan 2010). For this reason, these coming-of-age plots explore how seeing such reality from the perspective of childhood allows them to articulate a new order in which gender is re-constructed and performed. Furthermore, the exploration of rebellious daughters in these narratives, alongside those distinctive of the fiction of Edna O'Brien, Anne Enright, Mary O'Donnell, or Emma Donoghue, function as catalysts for the emancipation of mothers from male constraints. As D'hoker suggests, mother-daughter narratives in Keegan's stories draw upon a fixed hierarchical structure that incites mutual defiant acts and opens up a possibility for change: "In spite of her apparent return to a traditional, timeless and often clichéd rural Ireland, Keegan is actually interested in recording change – even if it is a form of change which acknowledges the importance of ritual and tradition. Most of Keegan's daughters, therefore, are able to move beyond their mothers without repudiating them, as was the case in earlier Irish fiction" (D'hoker 2016: 172).

2.2. *Stories of sexually liberated women*

The second group of stories in *Antarctica* includes three plots that portray unconventional female characters, whose sexual emancipation outside the confines of marriage is at the core of their transgressive acts. Interestingly, all take place outside Ireland in urban milieus, suggesting that extramarital affairs are more suited to modern-day settings than to rural environments. In "Antarctica", the story that gives the title to the collection, the protagonist longs to have an affair before she ages, even though she presumes it will be disappointing. The opening of the story – and of the collection – exhibits Keegan's superb use of irony: "Every time *the happily married woman* went away she wondered how it would feel to sleep with another man" (my emphasis, *Antarctica*, 3). Set in England, the protagonist, a middle-aged woman, leaves her husband and children behind with the excuse of doing her Christmas shopping,

while she goes into the city for the weekend intending to meet a man. When she comes across someone whom the narrator ironically describes as "the least threatening man she'd ever known" (*Antarctica*, 8), she accepts his invitation of going to his apartment and, taking the lead, she makes the advances: "Pretend you're America', she says, 'I'll be Columbus'" (*Antarctica*, 9). Blinded by his "ravenous" qualities as a lover (*Antarctica*, 12), she fails to read the signals that warn her against a man who keeps a shotgun cartridge at home, thinks all women need to be chased, and obsessively follows her the next day. Even though her sexual openness and self-confidence offer a refreshing view of Keegan's female world, his violence gains force, and she ends up handcuffed to the bed, drugged and abandoned to her own destiny. This is indeed an unfortunate outcome, considering that one of the few stories of the collection which gravitates around female emancipation is finally reduced to an account of gender violence, sexual abuse, and possession by a pervert. In the end, naked in front of an open window with the snow falling and tied to a bed, the protagonist contemplates the idea of death and hell and recalls the dead bodies of the explorers in Antarctica. The male-oriented and biased ending of the story rests on its wrong message emphasising how women should protect themselves from men and not how men should be educated in gender equality and respect. In a society in which women are expected to identify signs that might alert them against male predators, the agentive protagonist ends up swallowed up by her legitimate desire of escaping from a monotonous and loveless marriage, leaving the reader discomforted and disheartened.

Within this second group of stories set outside Ireland, the protagonist of "Ride if you Dare" shares with the previous one a desire to transgress gender expectations. Located in Mississippi, Roslin is seduced by an ad in the papers and decides to have a blind date. She is eager to run away from ten years of an unhappy marriage to a controlling man, who is "[j]ust a hard, empty shell" (*Antarctica*, 110). In these two cases, Keegan explores the chances of empowered female characters that enjoy taking the lead and are driven by an attraction for adventure, freedom, and autonomy; all of these, male territories. Apart from the breaking down of social beliefs and shocking male acquaintances, the story gives voice to women who explore new possibilities of pleasure and passion to counteract the dissatisfaction with their married lives. As the narrator puts it, "after ten years, she's getting what she wants, somebody who'll make her feel like she's alive again, like she's somebody under her clothes. She won't stay home any longer pretending, opening all those cans, hiding'em in the trash" (*Antarctica*, 117). Sadly, in Keegan's fictional world, women only appear to be sexually "alive" outside the confines of marriage. This is an overt criticism towards an institution that stands as the source of much misfortune in *Antarctica* and this re-emerges again in her second collection *Walk the Blue Fields* – for

instance, in "The Forrester's Daughter", whose protagonist escapes from her unhappy marriage thanks to a sexual encounter with a traveller.

The third story of an empowered woman who resorts to subversion to overcome the oppression of a reactionary society is "Quare Name for a Boy". In this account, the protagonist finds herself pregnant after six days of sex with a young man, "a Christmas fling, a thing to break the boredom of the holidays" (*Antarctica*, 95). Rebelling against a matrilineal heritage of "women who comfort men" as much as against the assumption that "Irish girls should dislike England; they should stay home and raise their sons upright, stuff the chicken, snip the parsley, tolerate the blare of the Sunday game" (*Antarctica*, 98), she opts to become a mother and move to England. She is one of the few female characters who succeed at freeing herself from emotional, national, and familiar ties to pursue an identity of her own. In a clear parallel to the author herself, she resorts to the subversive potential of writing to deviate from the patriarchal society she comes from, fictionally altering the lives of her surrounding family. Her empowerment springs up from her wish to write "something lecherous and bawdy, make *Fanny Hill* look like your Sunday missals" (*Antarctica*, 96) and from her capability to disguise herself and others through fiction: "They don't know the half of it. Don't know the disguises I've made for them, how I took twenty years off their hard-earned faces, washed the honey-blonde rinses out of their hair. How I put them in another country and changed their names. Turned them inside out like dirty old socks. The lies I've told" (*Antarctica*, 96). Reading into such a statement, it is not difficult to see how Keegan's fiction could be interpreted as an act of transgression, a weapon with which to condemn received values of familiar duties and beliefs, which need to be deconstructed in light of sociological ideologies.

All in all, the only three stories of the collection that render female characters who are proactive with their bodies and desires take place outside Ireland, two in England and one in the USA, while the awakening narratives of girlhood are located in rural Ireland or, in just one case, in the English countryside. The contrast between these two settings, urban and rural, Irish and non-Irish, suggests a confrontation of values as regards the social constructions of gender relations, sexuality and femininity. Except for the protagonist of "Quare Name for a Boy" (Fávero 2019: 148), none of the others serves as positive and liberating models of femaleness, the female characters remaining imprisoned by the traps of prejudiced relationships in conformist societies. In this regard, Keegan has often been criticised for unfurling traditional views on gender relations and has argued in an interview that a lot of Irish women still think from a male perspective, which is the world she represents in her fiction (Morales-Ladrón 2011). For Toni O'Brien Johnson and David Cairns, women who identify with the male culture interiorise this assigned role "resist[ing] the uncovering of the personal and

psychological price they pay for such role-restriction" (O'Brien Johnson & Cairns 1991: 4). This is precisely what is at stake in Keegan's fictional world, in which the absorption of uncontested social values unveils emotionally crippled characters, who lack the necessary skills to properly interact, share, or express feelings. Couples have no sense of intimacy, they very rarely touch, often sleep in different beds and sex is reduced to a primary instinct. In "Storms", for instance, the young narrator observes that her parents "never touched" (*Antarctica,* 71), and, in "Men and Women", the protagonist also notices that her "parents do not kiss. In all my life, back as far as I remember, I have never seen them touch" (*Antarctica*, 129). As Max Brzezinski contends, the reader is then left with "the sense that isolation and icy gaps invade even the interstices between parent and children, husband and wife, and other supposed intimates" (Brzezinski 2002: 340).

2.3. *Stories of women trapped into gender binarism*

In tone with the majority of the stories in *Antarctica*, which dwell on either fractured families or unhappy couples, there is yet a third group that precisely focuses on the impossibility of love or on maintaining satisfying relationships. Jeff Zaleski has put it in metaphorical terms, observing that in Keegan's Ireland "it is eternally winter, and familial relations provide neither appeasing warmth nor protection" (Zaleski 2001: 54). A suitable example would be "Love in the Tall Grass", a story of love and hope that ends in loss and emptiness. Symbolically set in the last day of the year and of the twentieth century, Cordelia, the protagonist, augurs that "when this day is over, nothing will ever be the same" (*Antarctica,* 23), which proves to be true. That day she is supposed to meet an old lover, a doctor who had asked her to wait for ten years until his children were grown-ups and he could leave his wife. With resonances from Charles Dickens' Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* and William Shakespeare's *King Lear*,[7] Cordelia shuts herself away from the outside world and locks herself up at home. Images of death abound in the story and are all evinced when she enters a church and mistakes the organ for a coffin. Although she has brought her life to a halt, time has not stopped; she has aged, and her hair has turned white. At the appointment, the first person she meets is the doctor's wife, who had been aware of their affair and confesses that she had wished her husband had left her. But when he appears and meets both, he goes numb and paralysed, exposing a magnificent Beckettian finale: "All three of them just sit there and wait: Cordelia,

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7 The similarities with the Dickensian character are more than evident: "A powder of rust-coloured ash fell over the house, accumulated on the sills, the curtain rails. It seemed that every time she moved she raised dust" (*Antarctica,* 34).

the doctor and his wife, all three mortals waiting, waiting for somebody to leave" (*Antarctica*, 38). This inability to act equates Cordelia's lack of agency with female self-denial. Although she used to meet the doctor on Thursdays to make love in the "tall grass", she is no Eve. The passive submission of the two women and the inability of the man to escape from a loveless marriage imprison all the characters in a web of inaction, which makes them passive victims of their own choices. The inconclusive ending leaves the narrative unresolved in an atmosphere of distrust for any kind of relationship.

A second interesting story belonging to this group is "Sisters", which does not directly explore a dysfunctional marriage, although its plot dwells on the results of an unhappy relationship and the pernicious effects of education based on gender stereotypes. The narrative portrays two sisters, who could not be more unlike in their physical appearance; a circumstance that conditions how they are treated by people and how, consequently, they will approach life: "Louisa with her gold hair and emerald earrings, looking so much younger than her years. Betty with her brown hair and her man's hands and the age showing so plainly on her face" (*Antarctica*, 146). Having lost their mother at an early age, Betty, the eldest, is expected to take her place and devotes her life to mind her father and younger sister Louisa, who grows as her father's favourite and whose beautiful hair makes a rich English man fall for her. Pretending to be leading a charming life in England, Louisa comes every summer to stay with her sister in their Big House in Enniscorthy. As the story unfolds, both her father and husband disappear from the scene, the first after his death and the latter apparently due to their failed marriage. In the end, gender stereotypes are overturned, and we are confronted with Betty who, despite her sacrificing existence devoted to family duties, acknowledges to have led a pleasant life full of freedom, while Louisa is caught in an unhappy marriage of unfulfilled pretensions. Eventually, such a transgressive finale can be reduced to what Tom Deignan has stated: "A sharp pair of scissors brings desperate catharsis after years of subtle abuse" (Deignan 2002: 24). Betty enacts her revenge by cutting her sister's hair, her beauty and her power, and she eventually witnesses how Louisa, who "looks nothing without her hair" (*Antarctica*, 161), abandons the house. Apart from the obvious gender reversal – seen from the perspective of the binary system that sustains Keegan's world – the story has also been interpreted as a turnaround of the colonial relationship between England and Ireland. As Asier Altuna has cleverly put it, in this story we find "the poor sister needing help from her colossal and always patronizing English counterpart. Keegan does away with a feminisation of the Irish land that was at the hands of England; a trope used in colonial and postcolonial discourses" (Altuna-García de Salazar 2014: 203).

Finally, "The Passport Soup", set in Oregon, revolves around the conflicting grieving processes of a mother and father over the disappearance, and likely death, of their 9 year-old-daughter. The author explores in detail the vindictive

response of the wife, her blame of her husband for his carelessness and her inability to come to terms with the loss, while he is tortured by a silence that makes an "invisible husband" of him (*Antarctica,* 202). His guilt and pain are rummaged in recurrent nightmares and, although his agony is explored with less depth, the narrator focuses on his emptiness, on how "[t]he house feels like a morgue. All that blame and guilt and silence. Except for those two words – 'bad dreams' – last night, his wife has not addressed him since September" (*Antarctica,* 206). The story finally resolves with her devising of a spiteful vengeance. She puts the fire on, dresses up for dinner, sets the table for three, and induces him to believe that they may restart all over again, only to make him discover that: "Floating on the surface of his soup there are nine passport-sized photographs of his missing daughter. Nine greasy, discoloured photographs…. 'What's the matter, Frank? Don't you like it? You never appreciated my cooking'" (*Antarctica,* 209). Although he implores her forgiveness, she cruelly annihilates him: "He hears blame, razor-sharp words flying like knives across the room, across his head. Words that cut him. She is tearing him, asunder, putting the knife in; she is twisting the knife. Twisting. But Frank Corso feels better. It is a start. It is better than nothing" (*Antarctica,* 208–209). In a distressful ending, the reader is left contemplating how the husband submissively accepts a punishment he does not deserve.

3. Conclusion

Through the present discussion, I have attempted to demonstrate that Keegan's engagement with gender issues in *Antarctica* resolves into the debunking of the family unit, commonly defined by dysfunction, fracture, lack of love and unhappiness. Her stories are disconcerting and discomforting, following the author's assertion that "I expect a great deal of my writing and I'm not writing to please anyone" (O'Hagan 2010). With very few exceptions in the collection, formed by stories that do not address family relations, most of the plots delve into the damaging gender imbalance and the impossibility of finding a way out of patriarchal strictures. Women's individual and societal disempowerment eventually leaves the reader with a brooding sense of unease, which is further increased by the awareness of the contemporary and diverse settings and by the portrayal of characters that find themselves unable to bond.

In spite of the different groups into which these narratives can be classified, which range from stories of awakening or revelation, where characters end up wiser though thwarted in their expectations, stories whose frank portrayals of female liberation end up in punishment, or stories that dwell on unhappy relationships, the power dynamic revealed is based on an enduring gender divide.

The equation between gender and power remains, therefore, unproblematised. Refusing to accept that there is any political agenda in her writing or that most of her short stories articulate a discourse around the dual construction of gender differences (Morales-Ladrón 2011), Keegan's apparent attempt to deflate traditional patriarchal values – mainly through her harsh criticism against marriage as the icon of the family – eventually reflects a conservatism still in place, as Fitzgerald-Hoyt has argued, making it extensive to all of her writings:

> Her women push back against men who attempt to control them and avenge themselves against those who do them harm. Men's love goes unrequited, and women leave the men who disappoint them. A farm of one's own, often the dream of the colonized Irish, in Keegan's fiction can become a succubus whose demands starve the emotional needs of the family.
>
> (Fitzgerald-Hoyt 2015: 280)

Whether the stories take place in contemporary Ireland, England, or the USA, in the city or the countryside, those included in *Antarctica* rest on an unbalanced system with family relations built upon the limited lives of women. Despite Keegan's attempts at exploring either sexually liberated models of femininity or empowered daughters, their marginal roles in society isolate them. While the author sets the narratives in times of prosperity, they appear to have remained immune to the economic growth, the socio-cultural changes and the liberal values brought up by globalised countries. Keegan's rural stories have more in common with the typical "farm families" that were established in the early 20th century to counterpart the power exerted by colonial British policies (Pérez Vides 2003: 47–48). In such milieus, the "happy ending" cannot be reserved for sexually liberated women, for girls who need to emancipate, or for men who are caught in patriarchal limited mores. Besides, Keegan's portrayal of families reflects the prevalence of nuclear traditional configurations. Since there is no revision of gender roles, the author's ultimate concern is placed on the human sources of mischief, misfortune, and lack of love in a world governed by inequality and stagnant moral values.

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