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The Self in the Other
An analysis of *Stir-Fry* by Emma Donoghue

Versão Corrigida

São Paulo/SP

2022

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Dissertação apresentada ao Departamento de Letras Modernas da Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas, na área de Estudos Linguísticos e Literários em Inglês, como requisito para obtenção do grau de mestre em Letras.

Orientadora: Prof. Dr. Laura Patricia Zuntini de Izarra

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*I loved you. I had infinite faith in you. And you were kind.
You were kind — so that I felt it, without knowing it. Which is a wonderful thing and goes far.*
— Mary Maclane, 1902, I await the devil's coming.

*I've been going to the library, looking up our history. There's a ton of it in anthropology
books, a ton of it, Ruth. We haven't always been hated. Why didn't we grow up knowing that?*
— Leslie Feinberg, 1993, Stone Butch Blues.

"I love you. I want us both to eat well."
— Christopher Citro, 2016, Our Beautiful Life When It's Filled With Shrieks.

RESUMO

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Esta dissertação tem como objetivo analisar os possíveis impactos dos padrões de uma cultura normativa e de religião no romance *Stir-Fry* (1994) escrito por Emma Donoghue. A história se passa na Irlanda, no início da década de 1990, e o estudo tem como foco como Maria Murphy, a personagem principal, entende o seu próprio Eu além da sociedade ao seu redor. É examinada como a forte influência religiosa perpassa na Irlanda rural e afeta o senso de identidade de Maria e a sua construção do seu ‘Eu’ e o ‘Outro’, e como estes conceitos mudam e se misturam ao longo da história e crescimento da personagem. Por meio da análise foi possível entender como Maria lida com as diferenças culturais de uma cidade grande em oposição à sociedade tradicional na qual ela foi criada, e como ela expressa sua criação conservadora em face ao diferente, mais especificamente via o uso de estereótipos e repressão. Por fim, a conclusão mostra como os cenários religiosos, culturais e sociais da Irlanda rural criam uma falta de memória coletiva queer, em geral, que como consequência impacta a juventude queer em desenvolvimento, mais especificamente lésbicas, não apenas dificultando o processo de aceitação do Outro, mas também o processo de reconhecimento a aceitação do próprio eu.

Palavras- Chave: Questões de Identidade, Literature Irlandesa, Estudos Queer, Emma Donoghue, Apagamento Lésbico

ABSTRACT

This dissertation aimed to analyse the possible impacts of the conservative cultural standards as well as religion in the novel *Stir-fry* (1994) written by Emma Donoghue. The story is set in Ireland during the early 1990s, and the study has its focus on how Maria Murphy, the main character, perceives her own Self as well as the society around her. The goal was to examine how the strong religious background that was perpetuated in rural Ireland affects Maria's sense of identity and what she constructs as to be the 'Self' and the 'Other', and how both of these concepts change and mix in between each other through the character's story and growth. Through the analysis, it was possible to understand how Maria deals with the cultural differences of a big city, in opposition to the traditional society she was raised in, and how she expresses this conservative upbringing in the face of those who are different, more specifically through the use of stereotypes as well as repression. Furthermore, the conclusion reveals how the social, cultural and religious background of rural Ireland creates a lack of a Queer collective memory in general, that as a consequence impacts the developing Queer youth, more specifically lesbians, not only further complicating the process to accept Others, but the process as recognizing and accepting yourself as well.

Keywords: Identity Struggles, Irish Literature, Queer studies, Emma Donoghue, Lesbian Erasure

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INTRODUCTION

The Recipe

Stir-Fry by Emma Donoghue was published in 1994 and the story timeline is set in the same time frame of the middle 1990s. The story begins with Maria finding an ad on her university board from two women looking for a roommate, with the warning of “No bigots!” and the symbol of the feminist movement drawn on it. The main character has just started college in Dublin and is living with her aunt, but wishes to move out somewhere else, so she can be more free and independent. Although she lives comfortably, Maria seeks change. She says it herself that “If Dublin was going to feel so odd (...) then the odder the better” (5). Although slightly apprehensive about the unknown, Maria decides to call and, after meeting the authors of the ad, Ruth and Jael, at a dinner party, the young woman moves into the apartment with the two of them. Extremely lonely in the new city, Maria's social life practically revolves around her new roommates, except for a few college colleagues. Maria is characterized by being very young and naive, almost innocent in some aspects. The protagonist is 17 years old at the beginning of the novel, and in her interactions with other characters, she constantly reprimands herself, thinking that she sounds too young and inexperienced when expressing her thoughts and feelings. One day, when arriving from work, Maria is faced with a scene she considers unexpected: Ruth and Jael kissing, with a level of intimacy and affection that makes it clear that this is not the first time that such an event has occurred. After reflecting on the last few weeks of living together, Maria scolds herself for not having noticed before, since it now seems obvious that the two are a couple. At the same time, she is irritated and resents her roommates for not having openly told her, asking herself “how the hell was she meant to know?” (69)

We can credit that a great part of her naivety and lack of social awareness regarding marginalized identities (such as other social movements) is a direct result of her cultural background growing up. Her upbringing in rural Ireland did not offer her a keen eye for diversity and non-normative existences, and that becomes very clear in her first interactions

with her roommates and university peers. Despite initial anger and resistance, driven by prejudices based on stereotypes, Maria slowly begins to overcome the barriers of internalized aversions and gets closer and closer to Ruth and Jael, finally realizing that their sexuality is not something negative. The relationship between the three becomes increasingly closer and intimate, until, at the end of the year, Maria is forced to face the feelings she has been harbouring towards her roommates. It comes to a point when Maria has no other choice but to confront her desire, the intricate intimacy she has created with these people and how it has affected her, and the grand possibility that her love for them is one that goes beyond friendship.

The book can be classified as coming-of-age, despite its story taking place over the course of just a few months, the main character experiences a series of essential changes and achievements to her idea of self. This is reflected not only in the narrative but also in the titles of each chapter, each one of them representing a step in a recipe for a stir-fry - A Chinese cooking technique consisting of vegetables and proteins tossed together in a pan, cooked in a small quantity of oil over high heat for a brief period of time, stirring constantly.

By the end of the story, it becomes clear that Maria's Self is not fixed or stable but composed of different influences - from moments, experiences, environments and the people with whom she surrounds herself with. She, herself, is the stir-fry that serves as the book title.

In 'Picking', Maria makes the first steps to deciding her future - choosing her roommates, and who to approach and become friends with, in University. The second chapter, 'Mixing', delves a bit more into these relationships while exploring the different backgrounds, opinions and social perspectives of these characters. 'Doubling' deals mostly with Maria's internal conflict regarding her roommate's sexuality and relationship, in counterpoise with her raising, and what to do after finding out. 'Cutting' explores Maria's feeling of disconnection from her hometown, family and herself. 'Heating' details Maria's difficulties in establishing romantic relationships with men, as well as feelings of anger and frustration towards her roommates and her family's expectations for her future. In 'Waiting', these conflicts are more delved into, and partly resolved by Maria's change in attitude and perspective in order to settle things in their own synergy, in a process of acceptance. The chapter ends with Jael kissing Maria abruptly, and being caught by Ruth, which establishes the conflict that is explored in chapter 7, 'Stirring'. In this chapter, Maria goes back home and reflects on her new surroundings and the recent events and how they have impacted and changed her. It also deals with the aftermath of her roommate's relationships and how that affects Maria and her own relationship with them and her other friend, Yvonne. The final

chapter, 'Serving', focuses on Maria having a conversation with Jael, facing her feelings both sexual and romantic towards other women, and more specifically Ruth. It ends with Maria accepting herself, and leaving the flat to go look for Ruth to confess her feelings.

Understanding the recipe

Throughout the novel, Maria experiences an intense process of metamorphosis and growth, leaving the end of her childhood years behind, together with her very closed off vision of what constitutes as reality and her Self, and becoming an adult that is self-assured in her new newly formed identity. The story follows the character's process of maturing and transformation as she left her home town in rural Ireland to attend university in Dublin. This change marks the beginning of Maria's self-awareness regarding how fragmented her identity actually is. The character has to come to terms with the fact that the image she has constructed herself is made under the historical-social influences of her place of raising. By changing the environment in which she lives, Maria establishes a daily relationship with a variety of people that come from different backgrounds, putting her face to face with what she classifies as the Other. By the terms of Jean François Staszak (2009), the creation of the Other is the result of a discursive process by which a dominant in-group ("Us," the Self) constructs one or many dominated out-groups ("Them," Other) through the stigmatization of an either real or imagined difference, that is presented as a negation of identity and therefore can be considered a possible motive for discrimination. Maria is raised in rural Ireland, therefore she has a very specific definition and expectation of the image of the Other. The Other is non-white, is not Catholic, and is not heterosexual. After moving, Maria is forced to not only face a reality and the existence of people that are not contemplated by the environment in which she is raised but also make her deal with the possibility that what she believes that constitutes as the Other is not what she expected. In addition, and as a result of this contact with the different, the main character begins to recognize herself with whom she has initially classified as the Other. Thus, the identity perspective of the constructed "I" is destabilized.

In Dublin, not only in the new apartment but also in Ruth and Jael themselves, Maria finds a new home. According to Brah (1996), the issue of home is intrinsically linked to how processes of inclusion and exclusion operate and are experienced by the subject in certain circumstances. The original home of Maria, in her rural town, is immersed in a traditionalist heteronormative culture. It defines the way she sees the world and in consequence, her way to categorize it, including its reaction with groups which she does not identify with. The

experiences she goes through in this new home she finds in Dublin modify this previously created vision, not only about the Other but about herself. Hall (1990) states that, when evaluating a subject's speech, it is necessary to keep in mind the traditions and inheritances of expression and cultural creativity present in the context of their raising. In this sense, the past: it is not only the position we are talking about but also a necessary resource about what one has to talk about (226). Maria's cultural background, although she tries to step back from it, has an enormous influence on the way she perceives society, from the use of stereotypes and concepts of right and wrong to the invisibility of certain communities. Maria cannot even consider the possibility of her roommates being lesbians, much less the concept of herself not being heterosexual, as her upbringing does not allow her to consider the existence of lesbians in the first place. In her work *Epistemology of the closet* (1990), Eve Sedgwick proposes that Ignorance is not only to be unaware or blind to a specific issue or subject, but it is actually representative of which knowledge a society deems too important to not know. Through presenting three different examples of ignorance that are subtly but undeniably supported by society, the author demonstrated that ignorance not only functions as a central aspect of how homophobia works, but beyond that, structuring other social contexts through homophobia. Sedgwick goes on to explain that Knowledge is not necessarily power, but it has the potential to become power, and therefore the regulation and perpetuation of ignorance, through the creation of Silence around it, is as pointed and performative as speech (4). Ignorance can be regulated and enforced in large scale, and it is not hard to find examples of this - in schools 'abstinence only' model of sex education, on newspapers choice to prioritize European and North American events, on the United States monolingual state of mind. The silence on Maria's environment regarding the existence of non-heterosexual people is intentional, her lack of knowledge regarding non-heterosexual people that does not go deeper than stereotypes is intentional, although not necessarily conscious.

Maria's local and social environment change affects her present, and the experiences she goes through, become part of a new phase in her history. Her new home, and therefore her new position and way of expressing herself, changed her speech. Consequently, there is a change in her self-identification.

What this dissertation seeks is to investigate how the author uses literary language to express the narrative character's identity construction. More specifically, how it builds identification of an "Other" through metaphors and stereotypes and, above all, how it describes the protagonist's shift in her world views and identification through subtle changes in her interactions with other subjects previously identified as the Other.

The methodological process used to carry out the proposed analysis can be defined as a critical reading of the chosen work, utilizing as a main theoretical basis the considerations of Stuart Hall and Judith Butler. The investigation proposed uses the analytical view of Queer theory that takes into account Butler's meaning of 'representation', alongside the theory of what is the concept of 'identity' and how fragile, fluid and multiple it is, as advocated by Hall.

Hall's theoretical framework on identity is relevant to the proposed study, since the author postulates that identities are socially constructed and constantly under change due to the influences of society around us. Butler's considerations are also relevant to this dissertation due to her work with the concepts of gender and sexuality and their treatment by society. Finally, other theorists such as Lewis and Harvey are contemplated for their work with LGBTQ + representation and its importance, as well as theorists such as Spivak, who deal with oppression and silencing of identities.

After the analysis based on the previously mentioned theoretical references, the conclusions and empirical results, derived from the crossing of the information raised and debated within the scope of the analysis proposal formulated herein, will be presented in a conclusion chapter.

In terms of content and order, this analysis has been divided following the same steps of a recipe - the one that forms Maria. This introductory chapter serves as the recipe for what is going to be read, through explaining the theory and steps of the analysis. The first chapter, The Base Ingredients, will focus on Maria's upbringing, on her life before Dublin. The excerpts analysed will be centred around her past and how she was raised and the dynamics that have influenced her social and cultural expectations - her family and the rural Ireland society in which she was raised. The second chapter, Slicing and Chopping, will analyse the paper and the influence of religion in general on the novel, and how it affects Maria's view of other people as well as who she should be/aim for, and her social habits. The third chapter, Pan Frying, will work on Maria's questioning within the process of change and the transformation of the subject within the new space, and the patterns in which they are inserted, and how that affects her perception of 'Self' and 'Other'. Chapter four, Serving, will relay the conclusions of the dissertation.

Becoming and Being out of place : pluralizing identity

The analysis follows a view based on the Queer theory since this, according to Milani and Wolff (2015), proposes an analytical view that focuses in deconstructing the social

processes that define which sexual identities, bodies and desires are considered normal and normative, and which are considered to be deviated or rejected.

This dissertation comprises representation as defined by Judith Butler (2015). For the author, representation is an operational term that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy to individuals as political subjects. When dealing with this representation through literature, it is the normative function of a language that would reveal or distort what is considered to be true about the category of these individuals. According to the author, for feminist theory, the development of a language capable of fully or adequately representing a non-normative group is fundamental to promote its visibility in a political way. This is especially important when considering the diffuse cultural condition in which the lives of women, and more specifically non-heterosexual women, were either poorly represented or simply not represented. Because of the postmodern world, the subject of women is no longer understood in stable or permanent terms. According to the philosopher, there is fragmentation within the group of 'women', making this an extremely non-homogenized community - which can be seen in the novel as Maria, Yvonne, Ruth and Jael are all women, although they all perform their gender identity differently. Butler proposes that the body materiality is a construction, built and shaped through different power structures that create our understanding of sex and gender. In Butler's view, this construction is "neither a single act nor a causal process initiated by a subject and culminating in a set of fixed effects. Construction takes place not only in time, but is itself a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms" (10). The subject is always constructed and formulated by their socio-cultural surroundings and power relations in which it is placed. The social concern with gender performance, and later on with sexual relations, is a way to regulate people, to ensure and reiterate the norm that has been established until then. These regulations and restrictions are socially reproduced through governmental laws, mass media, general spread of what is deemed to be 'common sense' as well as through ignorance and silence, as previously established by Sedgwick.

According to Elizabeth Lewis (2012), a linguist specialized in feminist and queer theory, there is a significant lack of LGBTQ + representation in the literature, although it has increased relatively since the mid-1990s, both in literary content and as a focus of academic studies on representativeness and its importance. Additionally, Keith Harvey (2000), Linguist with a focus on translation and Queer theory, defends that the presence of LGBTQ + characters in any type of accessible media is fundamental to help the survival of people participating in this community, since the representativeness generated by them leads to the creation of self-acceptance and resistance by the LGBTQ + community itself. In conclusion,

LGBTQ + representation is essential, not only for individuals in this community but for society as a whole. According to Edward Said (1994), the media is central to cultural establishment and domestication. That is, when presenting something (in this case, someone) in media, such as literature, we start a process of attempting to normalize the existence of this something - LGBTQ + people. Of course it is important to acknowledge that not all representations are accurate, age well or made in good faith, such as works that do present Queer characters but however do so through the lens of stereotypes, and therefore not representing the community, but a two-dimensional version that at its depths serves the purpose of promoting an anti-queer agenda. Sarah Schulman (2009) further elaborate on the problematics of Queer portrayal in the media, stating that when non-heterosexuality is acknowledged (which does not always happen), it can be often problematic as the media will either try to convey the idea that ‘things are getting better’ for Queer people, without showing that in most places queerphobia is still not only normalized, but highly encouraged, being maybe even more cruel than decades ago before non-discrimination laws had been created.

“Having a gay character in a book, play, film, or television show falsely codes that work as progressive. Often it even results in the work winning an award from a gay organization. But, if the actual meaning and content of the specific representation is examined, many of these representations are retrograde. They often portray the gay person as pathological, lesser than, a side-kick in the Tonto role, or there to provide an emotional catharsis to make the straight protagonist or viewer a “better” person. What current cultural representations rarely present are complex human beings with authority and sexuality, who are affected by homophobia in addition to their other human experiences, human beings who are protagonists. That type of depth and primacy would force audiences to universalize gay people, which is part of the equality process.” (Schulman, 2009, 14-15)

The author further explains that these false or shallow representations are often created under the objective of maintaining oppressive conventions and structures through concrete strategies in order to keep queer people’s subordinate status. Some of these strategies are false accusations that heterosexuality is superior and healthier, that queer people are a danger to children or that queer content is never child-friendly, and that queer people only get their achievements through unfair advantages due to their sexual identity (15-16). These inaccurate statements further perpetuate a stigma that lead Queer people to constantly have to “pay the emotional and social price of having to prove innocence that should not have to be proven.” (15). For Said, literature in the world has meaning because, due to its existence

and in actuality, it witnesses the different contexts and continuous struggles of subjects, emerging at the same time in text and historical experience. Without acceptable narratives to support themselves, and without the 'authorization' to narrate, the subject feels out of place and silenced.

When it comes to identity formation and fragmentation itself, Stuart Hall (2006) argues that the transformations to which postmodern society has been and is subjected lead to a radical change in the formation of personal identities, undermining the idea that there is a 'Self' as an integrated subject. The author classifies the loss of a stable "sense of self" as displacement or decentralization of the subject. According to him, this double displacement - decentralization of individuals both from their place in the social and cultural world and from themselves (as with Maria, in *Stir-Fry*) constitutes an "identity crisis" for the individual. The author quotes the cultural critic Kobena Mercer, defending that "identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something that is supposed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty" (Mercer, 1990, in: Hall, 2006, 43). For Hall, the subject, who would have previously lived as having a unified and stable identity, is becoming fragmented, being composed not by a single, but by several identities, and these can be contradictory or unresolved. The identification process itself, through which the individual projects their cultural identities, becomes, more and more, "provisional, variable and problematic". It is from this process that the postmodern¹ subject is produced, without having a fixed, essential or permanent identity.

Therefore, when dealing with the question of identities, the present dissertation is based on the perspective that the identities of postmodern individuals are built from social interaction. The aim is to consider how this process is reflected and, at the same time, elaborated through a literary work. The analysis was conducted with the identity crisis of the modern individual and how literature records the process of "decentralization" established by Stuart Hall (2002) in mind. The goal was to further explore the identity crisis in the postmodern individual, and in which fixed identities become identifications that are created through social interaction and built or altered by the context in which the subject is experiencing. This perspective, when interwoven with Butler's theory of representation and the previous theories of Lewis and Harvey mentioned above regarding the importance of Queer characters in the media, grounds this dissertation.

¹ It is not my intention to go in depth about the origins and effects of Postmodernism. To a better and further understanding of the subject, I recommend reading *Illusions of Postmodernism* by Terry Eagleton (1996), *Poetics of Postmodernism* by Linda Hutcheon (1988), and *The Question of Culture Identity* by Stuart Hall (2006).

On a related note, this dissertation will utilize terms such as sexuality under the understanding that it is a meaning-making system manufactured by culture and time-social locality, as the social understanding of both sexual and gender identities and performance are constantly changing with society and the understanding of our own humanity. It will also use terms such as ‘queer’ as an open term to when in reference to a few characters possible sexual identity and gender behaviour that does not fall under the heteronormative system that is socially proposed and reinforced, which can be seen under the understanding of the term by Madelyn Detloff as being used “to denote non-normative sexual or gender practices and/or subjectivities such as female-female eroticism, lesbianism, sapphism, crushing, bisexuality, cross-dressing, gender inversion, and/or transgender embodiment.” (139)

Women’s and Queer literature in Ireland

When it comes to women's literature, it is no secret that, like in most areas in society, the literary work produced by women was highly ignored and suppressed. Although women have been writing for a long time, initially in secrecy or through male-sounding fake names, it is only fairly recently that their work started to be recognized and properly studied.

With modern and postmodern literature, there is a rise in the moving of cultural margins into the mainstream - including feminist and queer representation, in terms of both characters and writers. According to Terry Castle² (1993), the very cultural intelligibility of gendered identity practices indicates the normative operation of causal relations between sex, gender, and sexuality that has historically worked more against than for the recognition of minority groups. As time passes, and social movements for equality get stronger and gain more and more social and political traction, there is a rise in the recognition and valorization of the work made by minorities in every area of society, including literary productions.

As this dissertation focuses on a novel set in Ireland by an Irish female author, it is only fair to try to establish some sort of context for the literary production of Irish female writers.

To mention some of the most relevant names would be Maria Edgeworth, Elizabeth Bowen, and Dorothy Macardle, known for their historical romances, and Maeve Brennan and

² It feels important to call attention to the fact that Castle in particular does not agree with the use of Queer as an umbrella term such as being used in this paper. I recognize the political importance of the use of the term ‘Lesbian’, exactly due to the extreme erasure that this identity in particular has suffered under a phallogentric heteronormative society, which is why I refer to *Stir-Fry* as a Lesbian novel. I also recognize that the same work contemplates not only different possibilities of female desire for other women, but also different ways to perform and perceive gender and sexuality and, therefore, use the term Queer and Queer theory throughout this dissertation.

Sally Rooney, Evelyn Conlon and Edna O'Brien, known for their more modern works on Irish diaspora and contemporary literature respectively.

Narrowing it down to openly queer Irish female Writers³, it is essential to mention Mary Dorcey, Claire Hennessy, Caitlín R. Kiernan and Anna Livia, all mostly known for their highly inclusive and political works targeting young adults.

When it comes to Queer literature in general, and any work that deals with terms of sexuality, it is essential to keep in mind that both sexuality and gender are socially constructed and, therefore, can take multiple forms and modes of being and having depending on the cultural context. According to Susan McCabe (2005), when it comes to the study and analysis of such matters, the focus should be on locating 'identifications', rather than identities, in the local social context of the original work. Desire is an innately human aspect, and thus it is presented differently throughout history and locations. According to Jodie Medd (2015), what qualifies to lesbian literature is often a matter of interpretation - not just what we read but how we read it (8).

According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993), lesbian literature is essential as the literary often attracts queer readers whose private sense of gender and/or sexual difference compels them toward textual companions. That is to say that reading enables awareness.

For matters of clarity and specificity, I consider *Stir-Fry* to be an example of 'lesbian' literature, mainly due to the fact that 'lesbian' is the main identity mentioned during the book, including being said by the main character herself when discussing her own identity during the final moments of the novel. Although some characters are stated as bisexual, those sexual identities are not treated as relevant or valid for the narrative. I consider to be important to use the term 'Lesbian' more specifically, due to the political stance it represents, especially in a novel that deals with not only homophobia but more specifically lesbian erasure and what can be considered compulsory heterosexuality in women. Throughout this dissertation, I will also be using the term 'Queer', when in reference to non-normative desires and identifications in general. As proposed by Mimi Marinucci (2010), Queer is "to live in ways that challenge deeply held assumptions about gender, sex, and sexuality. (...) Queer

³ It is also important to remember queer male Irish writers, such as Oscar Wilde (1854 - 1900) and Colm Tóibín (1955) who have been highly praised by their work. Wilde in particular suffered great consequences and imprisonment due to his sexuality, having his novel 'The picture of Dorian Gray' being used against him in trial, as proof of his "gross indecency".

encompasses those that are nevertheless incapable of occupying the compact spaces to which our cultural prescriptions regarding gender, sex, and sexuality have assigned us.” (15)

In the same way that literature written by women, especially during the 18th to 19th century, had been erased and unpublished for centuries, with exceptions such as Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters, for example, queer female literature also has suffered from high levels of oppression. While male sexuality and queer work is either bashed or accepted as an open secret, female non-heterosexuality was neither rejected nor accepted - it simply wasn't. There was no reaction as it wasn't even considered, to begin with, in order to gather a reaction. The concept of female desire, and thus sex in between women not involving men, was something completely unimaginable as women were not even considered to have any sort of libido. Sapphic desire is not a crime, as it is not something that is considered to exist - a mentality that has been portrayed for such a long time, we see it present in the novel being analysed in this dissertation later on.

Beyond that, the lack of recognition regarding Lesbian literature is not truly a matter of scarcity, but of academic disregard. It is not a matter of not existing, but a matter of not being recognized, or at least regarded worthy enough of being studied. Taking into consideration the concept of the 'lesbian continuum'⁴ established by Adrienne Rich in her essay on 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' (1980), there is a need for intersecting modes of queer reading that take up and reconsider how we read desires, identities, and relations between bodies variously gendered as female. The concept of the Lesbian has been persistently represented in terms of belatedness, derivation, imitation and secondariness (Annamarie Jagose, 2002), as female desire was seen second to male desire. As a direct consequence of that, the notion of a sexuality that did not include men at all is acknowledged much later in history (when/if is acknowledged), and for a long time interpreted as a 'derivation' or 'imitation' of male desire from 'man-hater', 'shunned' and 'excluded' women who sought to be men. For the longest time, most of the explicit representation of Lesbian-identifying women was made under terms of co-option by a pornographic male gaze. Seen and treated not as valid sexuality, but as purely sexual beings made for masculine pleasure.

⁴ The concept of 'lesbian continuum' understands the lesbian Identity is the sense of self of a woman bonded primarily to women who is sexually and emotionally independent of men. It proposes the overall range of the female subject, throughout their own life history, of woman-identified experiences. As in not simply a sexual attraction and physical act in between women, but an emotional and strong bond that women can share as they go through the same experiences.

With the turn of the century, there is a rise of Postmodern lesbian fiction that aims to articulate lesbian themes and concerns, aiming to end the ‘gentrification’ of Lesbian literature, redefining a socially stigmatized term and increasing acceptability and popularity (Parker, 2015). Postmodern, much like Queer studies and politics, embraces the margins and rejects the central and dominating narratives and culture, deconstructing cultural concepts and institutions that had until then been fixed and stable. The postmodern lesbian fiction questions the lesbian identity, the diversity within this identification, how it is perceived and how those who have such identification, navigate society.

With time, there is the development of a ‘post-Lesbian fiction’ which ceases to be aimed exclusively at lesbian readers, dealing with subjects of common life. According to Jeanette Winterson (1996), ‘literature is not a lecture derived to a special interest group’, but rather something that should be accessible for all (106). At the same time, Post-lesbian fiction also aims to touch on themes extremely relevant to the lesbian experience, such as homophobia, the pathologization of homosexuality, gender norms etc. Many twenty-first-century lesbian novels tend to adhere to the genre or structure of the ‘coming-of-age’ or ‘Bildungsroman’, in which the development of the character becomes the centre of the plot. In cases like these, the topics and experiences that are explored through the lenses of literature, many of them seen in *Stir-Fry*, are the ones such as how growing up as queer requires coming out of the closet or the process of sexual awakening and self-acceptance.

Emma Donoghue’s⁵ placement in the world of Irish and queer literature, and what sets her apart from most, is that her work almost always presents queer women or romantic relationships between women, although not always focusing on their queerness in itself or in their coming out process, but on how they navigate life within their position as queer. Her debut novel was *Stir-Fry* (1994) that was nominated for the Lambda Literary Award. Many of her following works such as *Hood* (1995), *Slammerkin* (2000), *Landing* (2007), *The Sealed Letter* (2008) and many others were all nominated for multiple lesbian or queer-recognizing awards. Besides *Stir-Fry*, her novels never seem to truly touch on the matter of the characters’ sexuality - they simply are non-heterosexual people, but that is an aspect that is not the focus or sometimes even pertinent to the plot of the novel.

⁵ Emma Donoghue was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1969.

With that in mind, it is interesting to call attention to the facts that Donoghue most popular work (*Room*, 2010) is one of her few works that does not present or is centred on a female-to-female romance. It doesn't even have a feminine perspective as central, like most of Donoghue's work. Although the character Ma is essential and completely integrated to the narrative of *Room*, the main character is still her son Jack. It is also one of the few works by Donoghue that is not set in Ireland. It could be considered an odd coincidence, if one does not take into account the long history of suppression of queer works mentioned before.

Emma Donoghue, being a writer who identifies herself as lesbian, then brings a fundamental look at people from the queer community, giving voice and focus to a marginalized group of individuals to which she herself belongs. When dealing with LGBTQ + representation, it is not only essential that it exists and that it is disseminated and studied, but also that the representation created by the group itself that is being portrayed, is treated in an even more relevant way. For Luke Gibbons (1991) the greatest contribution to anti-oppressive literature, which presents itself directly in distinction to the ideals created by one who maintains hierarchical power, is necessarily that which comes from the oppressed. Following this line of thought, the greatest contribution to literature that aims to represent such characters is, therefore, that created by authors who are part of this particular community. Although all academic and literary production aimed at representation is important, that created by the subject of the represented community provides an internal look that may not always be achieved in works created by those outside the community. That is not to say that the work on queer people can not be produced by those who are not queer - it is only a matter that as of now, there is still a preference to support authors and theorists that are aligned with heteronormative standards, instead of supporting those who are not. In the same sense, in an ideal world, there would be no need to ensure a quota for non-white and disabled students in universities as everyone would have equal opportunities to achieve higher education if they so desired - that is not the case of the real world as of the moment, however. In this ideal world, both queer and non-queer authors would get equally published, promoted and supported regardless of their sexuality, gender identity or gender presentation and, therefore, the stories written by both types of writers would get equal opportunity to shine. However, that is not what happens in the real world and, more often than not, work with queer characters or thematics written by non-queer authors gets more promoted due to a large amount of different systematic inequalities. I do not believe one can devalue all the work written about a minority group by people from outside such a group, it is simply a

matter of highlighting authors that are actually part of this minority, and are therefore writing from a place of experience and actual living, that might otherwise be silenced. There is a need to take into account the place of speech of the authors and their productions. Citing Brazilian feminist theorist Djamila Ribeiro (2017) the place of speech “gives an emphasis to the social place occupied by the subjects in a matrix of domination and oppression, within the power relations, that is, the social conditions (or social locus) that authorize or deny the access of certain groups to places of citizenship. ” It is essential to recognize the collective social character that determines the opportunities and limitations that permeate and form the subjects belonging to a given social group, overlapping the individualized aspect of the experiences. The unequal opportunities that different groups are subjected to also crosses the way of knowing and systematizing this knowledge. The experiences of groups that are socially positioned in a non-humanized hierarchy result in intellectual productions, knowledge and voices that are treated in an equally subordinate manner, in addition to the social conditions that keep them in a place that is “structurally silenced”. These social conditions hinder the visibility and legitimacy of the productions of these groups. Taking this into account, it is impossible to deny that the production of one who occupies a place of speech may have greater relevance than that of an author who produces from outside it. The occupation of this place of speech is what gives a valuable perspective to the one who speaks and/or writes.

In conclusion, it is undeniable that narratives carry the power to lead societies in the process of understanding and normalizing issues considered as impasses and inconsistencies related to the way in which the concept of identity is understood. This power, then, becomes even more relevant when we question identity representation and the fragility of these identities and their constructions in the postmodern world. What we understand as identity becomes, in the terms of Hall, flexible celebrations: formed and continuously transformed in relation to the ways in which we are represented or challenged in the cultural systems that surround us (Hall, 1990). The individual assumes different identities at different times, from the context to which they are inserted and is influenced by, and these previously or recently formed identities are not unified around a coherent “I”. “Within us there are contradictory identities, pushing in different directions, in such a way that our identifications are being continually displaced.” (Hall, 2006). A similar understanding of this process can be seen in Tina O’Toole’s work, when the author uses the terms of ‘Nomadic Subject’ in order to talk about those whose Subjectivity and understanding of Self is not fixed and also not completely

fragmented, but instead moving between identifications, places and categories - it illustrates subjectivity within the process of moving between and across the traditional boundaries that had been until then associated with categories such as gender, class or sexuality - for example, the disrupting of the traditional understandings of womanly identity of the binaries of heterosexuality and homosexuality. The same traces of theory can be seen in the work of Spivak (2010) when the authors write about the subject as divided and displaced, whose parts are not always continuous or coherent with each other. Maria embodies these concepts through her growth and reformulation as a subject and identification, being profoundly affected by the influences around her, not only human but also physical, considering her move from rural Ireland to central Dublin.

Furthermore, it is necessary to take into account the growing waves of intolerance and the intense insertion of the social logic of 'us' versus 'them', implying a distant 'I' and 'Other' and in opposite states, in the current world. Especially those who are part of marginalized groups, and it must be reinforced as something positive in order to lead to the eventual normalization of the existence of these groups. Taking up Said (1994) again, it is the duty of the person who performs the intellectual work of analysis not to accept the given identity policies, but to show how all representations are constructed, why, who and with what components.

With that in mind, this dissertation will focus on the changing identities in the postmodern world. More specifically, the change in Maria's self-identification. To Hall, the postmodern world celebrates fragmentation, it embraces difference and the different and conflicting aspects of identity. This embracing of fragmentation and understanding that all humans are different and formed by a variety of aspects and contexts, is the journey that we see Maria go through in the novel - one of not only knowing the Other, but of recognizing the Self through the other and therefore, knowing the Self.

Through this analysis, I plan to investigate what moments and interactions interfere with and change what the character considers and classifies as her 'I', what she considers as the 'Other', and the differences and similarities that lead to a gradual change in these classifications.

CHAPTER I

The Base Ingredients

The aim of this chapter is to dive into the environment and dynamics that have shaped Maria's views and cultural expectations as she grew up - her mindset before and right after her arrival in Dublin. Most of the scenes and dialogues presented only refer to her life before moving, instead of displaying the direct scenes of her interactions with her family and people from her town, as the character spends most of the novel back in Dublin.

The starting point of this analysis will be the family, as that is the first group that institutes the difference between Us/Self and Other, being "a cell of regulative normative heterosexuality against the deviant Other" (Foucault, 1976, in: Duggan, 2012 : 14) even if unintentionally. As mentioned by Tina O'Toole in her article 'Cé leis Tú? - Queering Irish Migrant Literature' (2013), humans are constantly and continually negotiating their positing within the heteronormative family structures, in order to work out who(s) we are. Furthermore, Maria Duggan (2017) affirms that in countries such as Ireland, identities and relationships are not only based on but also sharply delimited by familial and fixed spatial contexts that have tended to be paramount. Therefore, beyond the geographical location, familial structures are the ones that one draws the sense of, recognition and security in terms of both individuality and community. Duggan also quotes Conrad (2004: 4), in order to explain that "the centrality of the family cell to social, economic, and political organization defines and limits not only acceptable sexuality but also the contours of the private sphere, the public sphere, and the nation itself" (14). The image and ideology of the family are essential to the creation of the concept of Self, and the placement of the Self in relation to the Other, as it establishes one's position in relation to the community, and its history. It generates the first concept of identity, homogeneity, stability and placement.

In the opening of her book *Ties that Bind* (2009), Sarah Schulman affirms that there are two experiences that most non-heterosexual people share in their lives - 'Coming out', which the author defines as "a process of self-interrogation in opposition to social expectation that has no parallel in heterosexual life" (13) and the process of being mistreated and excluded by their family due to their sexuality. Schulman further explains that this experience is then mirrored into larger scale structures, such as the legal system, arts and entertainment industries. These are structures in which non-heterosexual must live with and within (as they are bases of society that determine a person's rights) and also select and control non-heterosexual representations to the society, and the community themselves. As a direct consequence of such, Schulman explains, "familial exclusion and diminishment is often extended by the behaviour of gay people toward each other. It is a house of mirrors of enforcement." (13).

Maria's family is composed of her mother, Caitriona, her father and two younger brothers who are all unnamed throughout the novel. She also has a few aunts, such as Thelma with whom she lived in Dublin during the beginning of the novel, although they are barely mentioned. During her first conversations with her future roommates, Maria gives a glimpse of how her life and family dynamics were back home - quite monotonous and revolved mostly around Maria hanging around at home, helping her mother to take care of the house and her brothers. Later on in the novel, during the chapter 'Stirring', Maria visits home for Christmas, and we are able to see their interactions more closely, instead of through mentions and short flashbacks.

One of the first times that Maria's family dynamics are explored with a little more depth, instead of just mentioned in passing, is right in the first chapter while Maria is out at a party with her friend, Yvonne. Yvonne tries to encourage Maria to flirt with another friend, Galway, to which Maria refuses.

Yvonne was smoothing out a crease in her skirt. "You have to start somewhere, Maria."

"Not with him, I don't." She gave a theatrical sigh.

"Your *problem* is, your standards are too high."⁶

⁶ All sentences marked in italics were done so by me, and are not highlighted in the original manuscript

“*That’s what my mother says.*”

She must have been about nine, that time she was allowed to sit up late to watch the Eurovision Song Contest and had kept commenting how *yucky* the men were, with their big ears or furry chests.

Mam remarked that Maria might end up an *old maid*, being too *picky* to be *satisfied* with any one man. Marriage was about *give* and *take* and a fair bit of *giving up* too. It occurred to Maria to suggest polygamy, which she had read about in her history book’s brief section on “Our Tribal Ancestors,” but her mother was probably too Catholic to find that funny. As her dad took her up to bed he told her not to fret, she’d be the *career woman* of the family. She *laughed* and threw a rolled-up sock at him as he turned off the light. (...)

“Galway’s not here, and he’s not my *type*.” (26-28)

This interaction calls attention to the fact that, even as a child, Maria has never been attracted to men - that is not, however, the main point of this quote. Maria is quite young in the scene, only nine years old, so it can be considered pretty normal (and almost positive) that she is not especially attracted to the grown men on her television. It is interesting, however, to call attention to her mother's reaction to Maria's comments, which is extremely negative. More importantly, the fact that Maria’s mother, from a young age, encouraged her daughter to lower her standards if that meant her marrying a man - even if it meant that she would settle for someone that wouldn’t make her happy. Her father does tell her that she can be the ‘career woman’ of the family, but Maria laughs and they both seem to take it as a joke. At the end of the day, Maria’s future is still pretty much expected to fall into the heteronormative⁷ patriarchal norms of the time. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler explains that gender is not fixed, but changes not only depending on its place in time and location, but also in terms of race and class - it is produced and maintained intrinsically through cultural intersections (6-7). Therefore, Butler understands gender as a performative act, as it is not something biologically established, but socially created and regulated. Performativity is defined by the repetitiveness of acts, being “a ritualized production” (60), which means what a society understands as a gender identity, and as a sexual identity as an extension of that, is based on a series of acts that are culturally defined. Through the repetition of these acts, one performs

⁷ Heteronormativity is the belief that heterosexuality is the default, preferred, or normal mode of sexual orientation. It assumes the gender binary (i.e., that there are only two distinct, opposite genders) and that sexual and marital relations are most fitting between people of opposite sex.

their 'gender identity' - "Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity (...) gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts." (179). Furthermore, Butler affirms that Gender proves to be performative— that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed (...) there "is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (33). In conclusion, gender is performed by the results of cultural production and social regulation in order to create a conformity to a hegemonic heterosexual identity standard, which creates heteronormativity. Not only that, but these rules and guidelines of gender consequently create the social perspective of sexuality, and stereotypes regarding sexual identities. Subjects that present homosexual desires are assumed to perform their identity more aligned with the opposite gender, as in women that are attracted to other women would present themselves in more masculine ways. Through understanding Butler's theory it is possible to see that gender is not something limited or restrictive, and our social understanding of it is simply guided but culturally constructed rules that are not actually set in stone and therefore do not limit the Self - different subjects can identify as the same gender and look and act differently than each other. By further extending this understanding to sexual identities, we can slowly dismantle heteronormativity by understanding that gender and sexuality are not intrinsically connected and that there are multiple different ways to perform and present both of them.

It is also interesting to call attention to Maria's consideration of joking about polygamy, but that her mother was 'too Catholic to find that funny'. Maria's mother proposes the idea of marriage as something that requires a lot of sacrifices, seeming almost as if the cost of marriage is one's happiness. Maria's joke would, of course, fall flat with her mother because although it would be a somewhat alternative solution to the alleged suffering and sacrifices of marriage that had been mentioned, a polyamorous relationship fell as much outside of the list of things considered acceptable by the Catholic Church, as the idea of not marrying a man. In different scenes that will be analysed, later on, her mother's image appears once again as the memory of what Maria should do or should be, and as a reminder of the punishment she could get for not acting accordingly. Maybe her mother is a strict, harsh and judgmental person that enjoys snipping at her daughter in order to make sure that she will fit with the standards expected because that is what she believes to be right. Or maybe she is simply a woman, trying to protect and prepare her daughter for what she has known to be the life of a woman in Ireland, so Maria can adapt, survive and hopefully not

suffer too much.

One of the biggest plot points in *Stir-Fry* is Maria's difficulty in accepting the Other and behaviours or identities that she had considered until then to be 'wrong' in some sort of way, or even simply imagining that some people are different from her idea of what is 'normal'. As previously mentioned, Maria's general social perception of society is shaped by the cultural environment in which she was raised in rural Ireland. According to Luke Gibbons (1991), rural Ireland persisted with an ideology of traditional values in the face of modernization, collectively refusing to abandon the normative and outdated beliefs held until then (568). At the beginning of the book, the main character states a need for leaving the rural environment and completely change different aspects of her life. This need reflects the final argument of the character's internal discussion about whether to move into an apartment with feminist roommates or not, and her decision to keep living there after finding out about their sexuality, and in many other situations where her traditional values are brought to light. Her past and upbringing, in addition to her age and lack of life experience, lead Maria to have a traditional and closed view at first, even if not consciously or purposefully. Her education guaranteed her a limited vision that renders the couple invisible, because how can they be together if both are women?

Furthermore, it is also interesting to note that while in Maria's first ever interaction⁸ with Galway, she seems to flirt with him, smiling and inviting him for tea, when pressed about the idea of dating him by Yvonne, she is quick to reply that he is not 'her type', although, throughout the rest of the novel, Maria doesn't bring up or mention what her type of men might be. We also see her flirting, and even kissing other men in other points of the novel, although it seems almost mechanical. She flirts with men as a conditioned reflex, not as an intended action, as a force of trained habit. These small actions, when connected to the general context in which she was raised and what has been noted to be strict expectations and rules, can be easily connected to Adrienne Rich's theory of compulsory heterosexuality. In her essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980), Rich uses the term to explain the social generalized assumption that all romantic relationships are between a man and a woman and that women are required to fall in love and chase a relationship with a man because otherwise, they are incomplete.⁹ This does not fall too far away from the examples

⁸ This interaction is further analysed in the second chapter of this dissertation.

⁹ Compulsory Heterosexuality is also greatly connected to lesbian erasure, which is a great point of the novel's plot, as it can be seen in the excerpt regarding lesbian relationships in Maria's school, and will be further explored in the third chapter of this dissertation.

that we see in Maria's raising, as there is this social pressure for her to marry and be a mother and housewife since early on, and the idea of merely following a different career is considered a joke, and the concept of Maria not liking men is not even considered a possibility in the first place. Moreover, even the mere existence of sexual or romantic relationships between women is not treated as something real. It is not treated as an abomination or moral sin per se, but more as if a silly fantasy, as it can be seen in Maria's reflection after witnessing her roommates kiss for the first time.

"The topic had come up before, of course. Girls *joked* about it all the time in convent school; there'd even been *rumours* about the *gym* teacher. At parties they swapped *Freudian theories*, and Nuala had once claimed to have seen a French film with two women in *bed* in it. *But it was never real.*" (69)

As Maria reflects on different events in her life that had portrayed romantic and sexual relationships in between women to her throughout life until then, she understands that those were always presented in a negative, and semi-fantastic way (jokes and mean-spirited gossip, as 'Freudian' theories, in 'French films' and in pornographic ways). More importantly, however, it's that "It was never real". Even though Maria was aware at some level that non-heterosexual women exist, she has never seen them as real, only in either negative or completely theoretical and fictional light, creating the root of her blindness to her roommates relationship. Women that love women are not real, they don't exist, and therefore she couldn't possibly imagine encountering a lesbian couple 'in the wild', in her own life. The possibility is foreign, and understood as something 'bizarre' for her. The only real relationship that could exist, is the one that is supported by her society and that she has seen countless times in her family, friends, community and on media - a Heterosexual relationship, the end goal.

According to Robert Merton (1968), social habits and goals are established, socially reinforced and culturally emphasized by prestigious representatives of society, and the family cell is the first and major agency to shape personality structure and goal formation (192). According to the author "parents serve as a transmission belt for the values and goals of the groups of which they are a part" (192). Although there are clearly declared goals and definitions of who Maria is, or should be (a woman who will marry a man and be a

housewife), her family doesn't seem to react violently or extremely negatively when she doesn't seem too eager about the idea of marrying a man - her father even makes a joke about it. Generally speaking, throughout the novel, Maria's family does not display any specific violent speech against people who could be considered 'different' from the 'norm'. There is no specific use of negative slurs or even discourse, with the exception of the assumption that Maria would, one day, marry a man. These expectations are mostly reinforced by Maria's mother. The lack of hate speech or aggression in her family's interactions matches Maria's general perspective and reaction to not only finding out about her roommates but about herself. It is not hatred, but a mix of surprise and estrangement, and frustration for having something hidden from her. Maria's internal conflict does not derive out of internalized homophobia, but of compulsive heterosexuality. It is not that she is raised in a family that hates and despises queer people, but one that doesn't seem to acknowledge non-heterosexuality at all. Therefore, she is shocked when faced with a lesbian couple that she had never imagined meeting, let alone sharing an apartment with, and it takes her a long time to realize that she, herself, also likes women. When she does, however, Maria does not hate herself for it, she is simply surprised.

Citing Merton (1968) once again, the family works as the major transmission belt for the diffusion of cultural standards to the oncoming generation. Not only that, but it transmits that portion of the culture accessible to the social stratum and groups in which the parents find themselves - that is to say that highly religious parents from a specific rural community will relay to their children the same social expectations that were enforced to them and that they believe to be right. Therefore, children are exposed to very specific "social prototypes and in the witnessed daily behaviour and casual conversations of parents. Not infrequently, children detect and incorporate cultural uniformities even when these remain implicit and have not been reduced to rules" (212). Maria's parents expect her to follow this specific lifestyle, they teach her this is the correct and the norm, and they follow this behaviour and cultural standard goals themselves. As a result of that, this is what she tries to achieve. On a different side-note, it is also interesting to call attention to the fact that the setting of these expectations creates a false idea that by getting married and having children, one will be happy, which is not always the reality, as we see in Maria's aunt Thelma, who is divorced and does not have a good relationship with her daughter. The production and perpetuation of this social discourse leads to an established social conformity, and those who deviate from it are seen as individual problems and not social. They're anomalies that, through seeking different ways of satisfaction, become excluded. This can be seen as Maria tries to think of unmarried

women and all she comes up with are either lonely or socially inept women, as it can be seen in a different passage:

Counting the lights of the small town nestling around her house, she realized that *all the women she knew were wives and mothers*. Except for the young ones heading for the uni, and that *librarian* with the *hay fever*, and a couple of *teachers*. And of course, *Nelly the Nutter*, who sat on the steps of the town hall, scratching her ankles. That night Maria slid down and tucked the quilt over her head and could not sleep *worrying* what she would turn out to be. (27)

Maria's upbringing was traditional, and therefore it strongly shaped her vision of the world and what she, as a woman, could be. She does not want to marry a man, as she seems to have no interest, and she doesn't seem to have dreams of kids and marriage at all. However, all the women she knew were either mothers or wives and those who weren't are entirely socially excluded or unfit. It brings into focus Maria's relationship with marriage and the lifestyle she is expected to have. The few women that break this rule are either too young to be married yet, like her, or have some sort of 'quirkiness' that deems them socially excluded and therefore, unsuitable for marriage, such as having hay fever or being considered crazy. Even if Maria's direct family is not the strictest or the most conservative, this paragraph says a lot about the society she grew up in and the expectations and social pressures that are inserted and easily internalized by her and other young women. She must marry and have children, otherwise, something must be wrong with her. It is a lifestyle that she feels obliged to pursue, even if she does not want to. There is a very small and strict space that she can occupy and exist as a woman, a limited amount of possibilities to be.

This restriction can once again be tightly connected to Butler's (1990) theory and understanding of gender as something created within its social and historical context (20). To the author, the concept of gender that permeates and is enforced by society is intersectional, being interwoven with different factors such as race, class, sexuality etc. As all of these subjects are deeply affected by time and local context, Butler's theory defends that identities are, therefore, built through discourse. As a consequence, gender is constructed and perceived through a series of performative acts that are established and delimited by the cultural environment, which leads to how the subjects in the novel understand and perceive the Other and their own Selves. Similarly, cultural theorist Stuart Hall (2003) states that Identity operates through the process of identification, being constantly constructed, deconstructed

and changing according to the change of environment. It is never total or stable - as much as one tries to believe so. The process of identification works through the difference, being marked by symbolic borders that are socially established (106). To Kathryn Woodward (1997), the concept of difference is fundamental to the comprehension of Identity as a result of a cultural construction. Difference can be built negatively, through exclusion or marginalization of those that are considered the Other, as we have come to understand. However, Woodward also establishes that difference can be celebrated as the font of diversity, heterogeneity and hybridization, being enriching to life and society, such as social movements that attempt to reaffirm their identities away from shame or negative light (50) - "identity, then, is not the opposite of, but dependent on difference" (Woodward 1997: 29). That is to say that Maria, and women in general, have their identities constructed around these ground rules and expectations that are set based on their gender, and those that do not follow these expectations that are culturally set, end up being rejected in one way or another. This becomes especially true in rural environments and smaller cities, where there is a less diverse population, and therefore making it easier to stand out in a negative sense. To once again quote Tina O'toole, there is a "persistent link between gendered heteronormative social institutions and national stability" (1) is left unchallenged, and can further be connected to what Breda Gray calls the 'mapping of heterosexual desire onto a patriotic desire for national families and, through them, the reproduction of the nation' (131). This delineation is so spread into society that is constantly repeated almost unintentionally, as it has become a second nature - something that we can see in Maria's interactions with her family and in any moment we see the subject of her 'future' being raised into conversation. People, and especially women, are simply expected to marry men and have children and become 'wives and mothers'. It is more than an expectation, it is the rule and way for the Irish people to follow the path of a Catholic, heterosexual marriage, having children that will grow under the church, have a heterosexual marriage, have their own children and so on, maintaining the image of the national Irish family that has been established as the right and only way until then. There is no space for the different, for the Other, regardless of what that other looks like - non-Catholic, unmarried, with no children or non-heterosexual.

With that in mind, Maria's shock later on when facing the discovery of her roommate's relationship status and her obliviousness regarding her own sexuality, comes with no surprise. If being a 'career woman' is a joke, the concept of being a woman that loves women was never and could never be considered a possibility for her to be while growing up.

In fact, as we will see later on, when Maria discovers that her own roommates are a couple, she gets completely taken by surprise despite the many clues that indicated their relationship status. The environment in which she was raised does not allow for different, independent women to exist, even less non-heterosexual women. And although there are no passages in the book in which her family are openly or directly homophobic, it is still pretty much a given that they are not fully acceptive, which becomes clear through Maria's reaction and inner monologue when it comes to dealing with her feelings regarding Ruth and Jael's relationship.

Maybe Yvonne was right; it was hardly what you'd call *normal* to be sharing a flat with—how would the nuns have put it, if they ever had to?—two *active homosexuals*. One of them being either *bisexual*, having implied at breakfast that she liked to lay guys without bow ties, or a convincing *liar*. The other being the kind of woman Maria would have liked to bring home to her mother. Both being *mortal sinners*, according to one rule book, and *pitiabile case histories*, according to another. (78)

As Maria reflects on her conversation with Yvonne, she concludes that her friend is right, and it is unnatural to share a home with 'two active homosexuals' - as if sexuality was something that could possibly be made 'inactive' by simply not engaging in the physical aspect of it. By that logic, all single people would not be asexuals. Regardless, her initial position regarding their non-heterosexuality is extremely negative, as that is the belief that has been passed down to her for her whole life.

Maria then once again reflects on her roommate's appearance and behaviour, seeming to finally realize that they are completely different people despite both sharing attractions to women, and therefore there is not really one single image of how non-heterosexual women should look. This passage once again brings to light some of Maria's internalized misogyny and how she views other women, as she describes Ruth as 'the kind of woman Maria would have brought home to her mother' - implying that women like Jael, who are openly sexual, are not the type of woman that you bring home to your family. Because women that are openly sexual are bad women. Regardless of how quiet or loud about their sexuality, they are still both mortal sinners and pitiabile case histories. There's no way that either of them can win, because their sexuality makes both of them inherently wrong, no matter how 'good' or 'appropriate' they are.

Such reflections regarding her roommates being sinners due to their sexuality are further complemented later in the novel. As Maria visits her family for Christmas, she begins to imagine her family's possible reactions to her coming out if she were a lesbian.

And if she did turn out to be that way *inclined*, Maria asked herself, for the sake of argument, *what would she do then?* She looked around at her family and relations, their plump indifferent faces, and imagined clearing her throat and beginning (in a rather Southside Dublin *accent*), "There's something I've been meaning to tell you ..." How their ruddy cheeks would cave in. It might be a *perverse* kind of fun, so long as she could spirit herself away on a magic carpet afterwards.

Or was she *underestimating* them? Auntie Bronagh would probably be sharp enough to *guess*. Perhaps, Maria thought, with a *chill* settling into her stomach, even a kiss showed, no matter what your motivation had been. The kiss of a woman might leave some kind of *mark*, a twist in the curve of the mouth. (196-197)

Through Maria's internal monologue, it becomes clear that, although her family is not the most strict or even openly homophobic, Maria still feels a lot of hesitance at the concept of coming out to them, even in a hypothetical scenario. At this point in the novel, Maria still identifies as a heterosexual woman but has been kissed by Jael. By simply imagining the mere idea of coming out, her stomach gets cold by trying to predict her family's reaction. She even sees herself apart from them, as when she imagines herself speaking, she does so in a Southside Dublin accent, and not with the more rural accent that her family has. Not being heterosexual puts her as a foreigner to her own family - a feeling that is repeatedly reproduced throughout the novel. In the beginning after moving, she doesn't feel at home in Dublin and feels at odds when in contrast with her roommates and her university friends. However, as the story moves along, the sentiment changes, and Maria starts feeling more and more as if she does not belong back with her own family, on the rural area, and starts getting in conflict even with her other friends such as Yvonne, who are more tied to the traditional values represented by Maria's family and cultural background.

Besides that, Maria also expresses fear that one of her Aunts might be 'sharp enough to guess' - and that she is now forever 'marked' after being kissed by Jael. Being engaged in an 'active homosexual' activity is seen almost as a curse, even if it was without her consent.

All of this operates together to shape one's social practice and are not always constantly related: the cultural emphasis of some goals varies independently of emphasis upon institutionalized means. There is a social structure that must be followed, and the proper adaptation to it works as a permit - if one achieves the aspirations determined by this structure, then they have a positive value or worth. This can be seen in Maria's thoughts on marriage and heterosexuality and her need to get in relationships with men regardless of her attraction to them, all due to her trying to manage her family's expectations and values. If unsuccessful, then she is to be set apart and excluded from her family, being treated as different and foreign, becoming the Other.

Maria's family, of course, is not the only institution to establish such norms and social expectations, simply the first one. The mentality of smaller communities and geographical location, such as rural Ireland, also collaborate to create one's cultural expectation and perception of the Self and the Other.

Recognizing the System: looking for a homely identity

By changing the environment in which she lives, Maria establishes a daily relationship with a variety of people that come from different backgrounds, putting her face to face with what she classifies as the Other. By the terms of Jean François Staszak (2009), the creation of the Other is the result of a discursive process by which a dominant in-group ("Us," the Self) constructs one or many dominated out-groups ("Them," Other) through the stigmatization of an either real or imagined difference, that is presented as a negation of identity and therefore can be considered a possible motive for discrimination. When it comes to rural Ireland, where Maria is raised and therefore creates her cultural expectations of Self and Other, that means being white, Catholic, male and heterosexual. After moving, Maria is forced to not only to face a reality and the existence of people that are not contemplated by the environment in which she is raised but also makes her deal with the possibility that what she believes that constitutes as the Other is not what she expected. In addition, and as a result of this contact with the "different", the main character begins to recognize herself with whom she has initially classified as the Other. Thus, the identity perspective of the constructed "I" is destabilized.

In Dublin, not only in the new apartment but also in Ruth and Jael themselves, Maria finds a new home. According to Avtar Brah (1996), the issue of home is intrinsically linked

to how processes of inclusion and exclusion operate and are experienced by the subject in certain circumstances. The original home of Maria, in her rural town, is immersed in a traditionalist heteronormative culture. It defines the way she sees the world and in consequence, her way of categorizing it, including its reaction with groups with which she does not identify with. The experiences she goes through in this new home she finds in Dublin modify this previously created vision, not only about the Other but about herself. Stuart Hall (1990) states that, when evaluating a subject's speech, it is necessary to keep in mind the traditions and inheritances of expression and cultural creativity present in the context of their raising. In this sense, the past is not only the position we are talking about but also a necessary resource about what one has to talk about. Although Maria tries to step back from her cultural background, it has an enormous influence on the way she perceives society, from the use of stereotypes and concepts of right and wrong to the invisibility of certain communities. Maria, as previously addressed, cannot even consider the possibility of her roommates being lesbians and the concept of being a lesbian herself even less, as her upbringing does not allow her to consider the existence of lesbians in the first place. Her local and social environment change affects her present, and the experiences she goes through becoming part of a new phase in her history. Consequently, there is a change in her self-identification.

During Maria's first dinner with her future roommates, as she listens to Ruth and Jael talk about their lives and relationship with the city of Dublin, the character thinks to herself "How many years before she would become a foreigner like them?"(13). It is interesting that she categorizes as foreigners, not people who are not from Ireland, but simply those who are raised in a different city, with a different cultural setting and lifestyle. The character puts them under the label of the "Other", as they have lived through different experiences and social expectations than the ones she was raised with. Soon after, in contrast to her new roommates, Maria talks about her own life back at home while growing up.

Maria was reminded that she still had to prove herself. "About what you were asking—I *can't* really say what I *like* to do. (...) It's just that I've never lived away before, so I *don't know* what I'll be like. At home, I draw and watch wildlife documentaries and stuff. I sit around *nattering* to Mam while she cooks, and keep my brothers away from breakable objects. (20)

Maria's upbringing has clearly deeply affected the character's understatement of her own identity. The character lived a very tame life, without hobbies that diverged from her expected future, as a calm, domestic wife and mother. Her life revolved around taking care of her brothers and helping out her mum at home, chattering about unimportant matters. We also later learn that, in true Irish fashion, she attended mass every week with her family, and it is what Maria seems to consider a big social event. Later on, when talking about friends and friendship, she also does not seem to have much of a connection or social life with people from her own generation back in her hometown.

In truth, this shows how much Maria does not know about herself, how much of her identity she ties to her home and how hard it is for her to separate herself from it to try and think about what she does like. The experience of leaving the place in which she grew up into a completely different environment is her first chance to grow and find out more about herself, all the parts that are hidden and unseen and buried down after 17 years of a social life that does not allow for these parts to emerge and exist freely. As mentioned before, the character eventually does discover more about her Self and her likes, although certainly more than she expected to.

In the same conversation, we get another glimpse of Maria's life back at home, and how she perceives herself in relation to her other peers from her generation that were currently following the same path as her - leaving for University.

"But then," Jael went on, "how are we meant to know whether you have all the necessary attributes of a good flatmate?"

"Guess."

Her mother would *slap* her hand for being rude, but then, her mother was more than a hundred miles away. And they never had *cream* in coffee at home. She took the jug from the outstretched hand of Ruth, whose eyes rested on her. "Tell us this much—how did you come to answer our ad? I'd have thought you'd have *friends from home* coming up to college with you."

"Oh, I have. Well, school friends, *not real friends*. They're mostly doing commerce or agriculture. They're nice, there's nothing wrong with them," she added

uncomfortably. “It’s just that I’ve had enough of *pretending* to be equally nice.”
(14-15)

In just a few lines, the reader is exposed to a few different aspects of Maria’s life at home and some of the cultural expectations in terms of social behaviour that is expected, and how she would be treated if she disobeyed them. Jael asks a question, and Maria gives back a cheeky retort - the exchange is far from rude or impolite, but the tone could be far from what is typically understood as ‘lady like’. Maria then thinks that, as a punishment for that, her mother would have slapped her for talking back. Once again, her mother is seen as the controlling one, the one that punishes and tries to best shape Maria as the woman that she is supposed to be in order to be socially approved. There is also a brief comment about never having cream in coffee at home, which could mean different things such as an extra expense, a matter of keeping traditions or, most likely, simply the act of adding something frugal to coffee, instead of having church approved humble black coffee. According to Tom Inglis (2006), one of the most crucial aspects of the relationship between religion and the Irish society is the embodiment of a Catholic habitus, which will be further explained in the next chapter, but more particularly the general orientation towards self-denial which can be seen by ‘never having cream in coffee at home’. The act of allowing herself this small indulgence, in this new place away from home and her family, is one of the first small steps of Maria’s path away from the traditional environment she was raised in. The exchange in itself already shows that Maria starts to breach more into becoming herself, she has reminders in the back of her head of the punishments she would get for acting like such.

This scene also explores, once again, how Maria feels at odds with the people around her - how much she does not actually fit in, even if she has done her best until now to follow the social and cultural expectations set on her. She isn’t excluded or ostracized from the community in any way, she simply doesn’t seem to particularly be interested enough in them to develop real connections, therefore classifying them as “School friends, not real friends”.

It is also interesting to note the university courses mentioned - Commerce and Agriculture. Considering that Maria moves from rural Ireland, it would make sense that those were the academic paths that would have been chosen, as they are quite useful for the area and lifestyle that will most likely have if they were to return home after graduating - which is implied to be the most common scenario. Maria, on the other hand, majors in Art history, and

seems to think to take cleaning office jobs or anything really, that has absolutely no connection or implication of going back home - one might consider that this is one of the many acts in which Maria seems to be unconsciously trying to break free from her old self.¹⁰

Finally, to end her statement, Maria declares something about herself for the first time in the scene - that she doesn't see herself as nice, that she pretends to be, and that she is tired of it. This small sentence gives three important declarations about Maria's self-perception and, for the first time, presents her in a light that goes against the image of the naive, innocent girl that has been presented until that very moment.

As seen by the previous excerpts, Maria does not feel connected to the place that she was raised, or the culture and social standards in which she was raised in, and this relation is also presented through Maria's very name.

“Hello there, new person, I'd forgotten all about you. It's Maria, right?”

“Yeah, but with a hard i—*Mar-iy-a*,” she explained. “But it doesn't really matter, everyone tends to pronounce it wrong anyway.” God, how seventeen.

“Did you deliberately pick it to *rhyme with pariah*?” asked Jael (...).

“Eh, no, actually. (...) *What does it mean?*” (...)

“*Outcast*,” murmured Ruth as she carried the wok to the table, her face averted from the steam. “Pariah is the lowest of the Indian castes.” (11-12)

Although the name Maria is closely connected to the bible and the Catholic religion and would, therefore, place Maria at the very centre and deeply connected to all the cultural and religious aspects expected from her environment growing up, the different pronunciation of the same word puts her outside of it, her name meaning to be an outsider, someone who is socially excluded due to being different or inferior - a status that Maria and her environment usually attribute to all deviant identities, including non-heterosexual people, as Maria turns out to be. In a way, her name works as almost a premonition of Maria's discovery regarding her own sexual identity.

¹⁰ This observation was kindly offered to me by the professor Ruan Nunes on my masters qualification.

Furthermore, the standards set by her cultural background are not only extremely limiting on her view of what women can and should do or be, but they also impair Maria's ability to pick on social cues that anything or anyone else might be different from these expected standards.

"2 ♀ SEEK FLATMATE." Two diamonds of masking tape held the card to the notice board. "OWN ROOM. Wow! *NO BIGOTS.*" (...)

"Sorry, but would you have any idea *what* exactly the wee symbol *stands for*?" Salmon-pink fingernails covered a small yawn. "Just means women", the girl murmured, "*but they'd be fairly feminist, you know the sort.*" (3 - 5)

The very first lines of the book are the ad posted by Jael and Ruth when looking for a roommate, which is what sets the story into motion. Maria asks a roommate about the woman symbol, a pre-indicator of her lack of knowledge when it came to feminism and other activist symbols and indications of the time. Her colleague, Yvonne, replies that it's a symbol for women used by 'the fairly feminist, you know the sort'. The use of the word 'feminist', a variation of the proper term 'feminist', indicates a negative connotation, which is further proved by the expression 'you know the sort'. It not only implies that being a feminist is seen in a negative light, as if feminists are 'less than', but it also establishes that this is a known fact within the spectrum of social norms.

Yvonne's tone is dismissive and portrays a negative indicator, which shows how matters such as feminism are seen by the society surrounding Maria in the book, even in a big city. It's a negative view that Maria seems to struggle with throughout the first chapters of the story.

It was not *familiarity* she had come here for. If Dublin was going to feel so odd (...) then the *odder* the *better*, really. (5)

This short sentence, an almost fleeting thought, right at the beginning of the novel, serves the purpose of foreshadowing Maria's change of mentality throughout the book. She does not move to Dublin in search of what's familiar, such as a religious, tame and predictable life. Her look for the new and different are what led her to take chances and leaps of faith, moving in with Ruth and Jael, trying new things and exploring her sexuality. By the end, she finds herself to be completely different from the start, in oddity with Maria from the

beginning of the book. The same feeling of longing for something different, for this alien placement, can be seen once again in a previously mentioned moment of the same chapter:

How many years before she would become a *foreigner* like them? (...) The *accent* was wavering already; her “good night” to the bus driver this evening featured vowels she never knew she had. (13)

Although this scene is not specifically relevant to the matter of Maria’s sexuality and self-discovery, it is an interesting scene that sets her mentality regarding what she considers to be the Other and how she is easing into change.

In the first sentence, she refers to other Dubliners as foreigners. They are not quite that, as they are still Irish after all, but she classifies them as so, for they are from a completely different life from hers. It is interesting that she categorizes as foreigners, not people who are not from Ireland, but simply those who are raised in a different city, with a different cultural setting and lifestyle. The character puts them under the label of the Other, as they have lived and perpetuated different ideals than the ones she was raised with. The differences between the big and the small city and their lifestyles make it seem as if they are from a whole different country in Maria's eyes. It shows from the very beginning how much of her thought process relies on the basis of establishing difference and how strongly she positions herself separated from it, though not necessarily in a negative sense.

The act of calling Dubliners foreigners at the beginning of the book also makes for an interesting parallel with the excerpt analysed at the beginning of this chapter, in which Maria wonders how would it go if she were to come out to her family, and as she does that, imagines herself with a Dublin accent, setting her completely apart from the rest of her family.

It is almost as if by longing for being a foreigner like the people from Dublin, becoming estranged from the people and place she grew up in, she aims to actually find familiarity and herself. As if she has never felt fully comfortable and herself back home, and so she looks forward to a new place, where she can become or find herself. Maria looks for the strange and unknown, for the foreigner, in order to find familiarity and intimacy.

The second part of the excerpt calls attention to the small changes, and how quickly they have been happening in the short amount of time since she moved to Dublin - first her accent wavering, then later on her religious habits and beliefs, until the complete change of whom she believes herself to be.

Recalling Gibbons's (1991) explanation of rural Ireland ideology of traditional values, and its normative social standards, we can understand a bit better the cultural values in which Maria was raised, and therefore have shaped her vision of society, how it should work, and how people should exist on it. Furthermore, Fintan O'Toole (2009) defines 'culture' as a set of ways of seeing the world, and it is the most powerful when it is entirely unconscious - a set of practices and judgments that people realize without thinking (100). The author suggests that 20th century Ireland, more specifically the 1990s, places itself in the peak of hyper globalization that leads to a complete restructure of its society. As a result of that, some of the things that used to measure the continuities of society as it had been established and known until then, cease to function - which is the case of highly conservative and religious beliefs and traditions that had been set into place until that moment. With globalization and higher levels of urbanization and contact with different individuals, society starts to then, slowly but surely, reject such ideas and make a shift away from it. This gradual process of moving is reflected in 'Stir-Fry', as the story starts with the main character stating her need for leaving the rural environment and completely changing different aspects of her life. This desire for change and independence is the final argument in the character's internal discussion about whether to move into an apartment with feminist roommates or not and keeping living there after finding out about their sexuality, and in many other situations where her traditional values are brought to light. Her past and upbringing, in addition to her age and lack of life experience, lead Maria to have a traditional and closed view at first, even if not consciously or purposefully. Her education guaranteed her a limited vision that makes the couple invisible, because how could they be together if both are women? When dealing with other remnants of her upbringing that are ingrained in her values and routines, she also initially plans to continue attending Mass, but increasingly seems to be sabotaging herself, so she does not have to, forgetting to set the alarm to wake up, etc. Furthermore, at different points in the novel, she seems to try to force herself to develop romantic feelings for male characters, although she has no real attraction to them, as it is 'what you should do'.

As a result of these outdated, conservative and restrictive expectations, the rural environment of Ireland reproduces a cycle of repressing and silencing any minorities, and completely excluding those who do not abide by their expectations, and is classified as the Other. In her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988), literary theorist Gayatri Spivak describes these minorities that are left to the margins of society as the silent, the silenced centre of a circuit marked out by epistemic violence (25). According to the author, "a figure

of 'woman' is at issue, one whose minimal predication as indeterminate is already available to the phallogentric tradition (...) For the 'figure' of woman, the relationship between women and silence can be plotted by women themselves" (28). Women are automatically silenced as they are expected to exist within the constraints and possibilities made available to them under a male-centred society and need - therefore, they stop being seen as humans with dreams, feelings and lives of their own, but as future wives and future mothers. Women are silenced from birth, having their voices drowned in a sea of rules and lists of what you can be, and you can not be. After centuries of that, with generation upon generation of female silencing and traumatic treatment from society, women become not only silent but also blind when it comes to seeing and understanding their own needs and desires.

To quote Spivak once again, "Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly affected. (...) The ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in the shadow" (28). Circling back to Sedgwick's theory, ignorance is ignorance OF a knowledge, it is a choice that has been made and perpetuated, a history that has been intentionally erased.

According to Fintan O'Toole, the 1990s bring all sorts of conflicts to the Irish identity - With the Celtic Tiger, the boom in the economy in a nation that has based part of its identity on being poor, the wave of progressive movements versus the conservative highly religious and puritan view, the matters of migration that created a new breach of diversity within the nation (106). For the author, Ireland is marked by its discontinuity, its lack of stability. In similar fashion, we can see the same lack of continuity and instability of identity being reproduced by Maria in *Stir-Fry*.

If the Irish identity is settled in being the outsiders (Fintan O'Toole, 2009: 1040), then how does one become the outsider inside this own nation? By being invisible. By being undesirable. By representing the 'anti' of the ideal - a hypersexual woman like Jael, a feminist activist like Ruth, a woman that likes women - like Maria eventually finds herself identifying as. This matter, alongside the explicit appearances of the Catholic Church influence in the novel, will be explored in the next chapter.

Both Inglis and Gibbons offer an interesting and extensive panoramic of the long history of Catholicism in Ireland and its deep effects on society and the further consequences enabled by the social habits and goals that are culturally established, as explained by Merton.

Within that, inside the larger scheme of society, these habits, goals and expectations are more strongly defined when passed along through the family, as explained by Merton and Duggan. It is clear that not only the collective identity of Irish people is deeply affected, but their personal identities as well, and how they position themselves in society, as discussed by both Tina O'Toole, Fintan O'Toole, Staszak and Hall. As a further consequence of such, those whose identity or identification are deviant from the established norm end up being either erased or ostracized by society, as Spivak, Duggan and Tina O'Toole wrote.

In conclusion, it seems easy to identify that Maria's naive perception and partial blindness regarding the existence of lesbians and of her own sexuality are the clear results of a long line of Queer erasure and ignorance, part of a larger scheme created by the oppressive and conservative culture of Ireland, due to its history and strong ties with the Catholic Church. Ireland is not, by any means, considered to be a major centre of diversity. However, its urban centres, such as Dublin, definitely offer a larger pool of different identities than rural Ireland and, therefore, it also presents a higher level of acceptance. The rural areas of Ireland tend to be more isolated, and therefore, less diverse, more conservative and more set on its traditional beliefs. In 'Stir-Fry' in particular, there seems to be a bare-minimum contact with people who differentiate from the norm, in a distinguishable effort to not socially integrate those individuals, as seen in Maria's inner monologue regarding women that weren't married or had children. Within this larger aspect of social-historical factors, her family, and especially her mum, seem to strongly enforce the idea of what is acceptable to do or not to do and who she should be. Identities, and how one should perceive other identities, are very policed in the environment in which Maria is raised and, therefore, it leads to her being confused, obtuse or simply ignorant when it comes to those who are different. It is a lack of awareness so deep, that Maria becomes an embodiment of compulsive heterosexuality, not because she is surrounded by extreme homophobic hate speech (although it is still a clearly unsupportive environment) and therefore is afraid and disgusted by the idea of being gay, but because she is unable to identify her own Queer desires. By being, without any awareness, an outcast raised in an environment that presents no real context, history or representation of Queer people, Maria unintentionally becomes an outcast to her own self, by not recognizing her own sexuality due to a pre-set rejection.

It becomes clear, then, that rural Ireland - through its hidebound structure and meticulous conveyor belt system that operates through agents such as education, media and, most importantly, family - not only cruelly erases and shuns those who are different, but

denies the possibility of younger generations (that have been extremely sheltered) to be able to recognize their own identities. Unless these subjects, like Maria, act upon the physical change of location and therefore gain a chance to explore and find themselves, they are doomed to forever feel dislocated and estranged in their own houses, their own skin, without ever understanding why.

CHAPTER II

Slicing and Chopping

It is impossible to talk about almost any story set in Ireland, without mentioning the aspect of religion - more specifically, the long-lasting conflict between different branches of Christianity. The relationship between the Irish and Catholicism is not only extremely complicated, but an essential part of Irish history and identity. Furthermore, it is also impossible to ignore the long, violent and complicated relationship between Christianity in general and non-heterosexuality, and all the extensive connotations and fears that it has raised. Undeniably, religion has played a large role when it comes to the spread of homophobic ideas and behaviours, as well as influencing the setback on fights for equal rights for the LGBTQ+ community.

In his talk 'Irish Society and Culture in the Twenty-First Century' (2009), Fintan O'Toole proposes four triads to explain the evolutionary process of Irish society and cultural identity, and its ties to Catholicism and the nationalist movement. For the first triad, O'Toole refers to James Joyce's novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, defining the three movements as 'Silence, Cunning and Exile', focused on the role and position of the artist within that Irish society after the establishment of the Irish state in the first half of the 20th century. The second triad, Land, Religion, Nationality, is proposed by Daniel Corkery, as a set of characteristics that define the Irish - The relationship to the Land (in essence, to be rural, agricultural), a relationship to Catholicism and a relationship to the Irish Nation (Corkery, in: O'Toole, 2009, 102). To O'Toole, these are the three pillars of the 'official Irish Culture, establishing a deep connection to the people.

The third triad is an 'antagonistic' replacement to the first two during the 1980s and 1990s - Sex, Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll. According to O'Toole, the previous triads of Ireland led to a self-conscious generation that actively rejects those values and ideals, having no interest in land, nationality and religion while simultaneously not feeling the need for silence, cunningness and exile (103). There is an ironic shift, as although the third triad stands in opposition to the first two, it is, simultaneously, Irish in the simplest sense. It allows for Irish artists to produce work about being Irish in the sense that they know and that feels natural,

based around what they know and see locally, instead of being focused on larger issues and conflicts, which had been the base for the first two triads until then.

The Fourth and final triad, arises with the beginning of hyper globalization as a direct consequence of the Celtic tiger, booming Ireland's economy. These three new pillars, that define the new Irish perspective on their own identity, are Migration, Wealth and Conflict. Migration stands in direct contrast with Exile, as it stands for the large new influx of inward migration instead of outward - which until then had been a huge part of the Irish identity. Wealth, due to the new economic state, came in contrast to decades of the Irish image being of poor farmers and working-class people, always being deeply connected to poverty and financial struggle. The Conflict stands as a continuation of sorts of Irish Culture, with the settlement of the Northern Ireland clash. This presents a context to the social environment in which we find the characters in the novel, showing that not only their personal identities are in conflict with their desires, but the national grasp of the Irish identity as a whole.

Despite the fact that Maria does not leave her country entirely, she does move away from a small village to a large city, leading to a change of environment that offers different cultural perspectives and values. She is, regardless of the extension of the change, letting go of ties that had been binding her to what she had considered the Self for her entire life until that moment. Finally, although the conflict for Fintan O'toole refers to the partition of the country into Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland, we can understand the same line of conflict in the story applied into a different meaning. For Maria, the conflict brings a partition of the Self, and the struggle and separation between the old traditions and fixed, conservative views, and the new Self, that is in constant process of becoming.

We can also briefly see the matters of wealth represented in the novel, although not being quite the focus, as Jael is far more well off financially, mentioning travelling abroad multiple times and apparently not having to work, while both Maria and Ruth find financial independence through more rough work, Maria as a cleaner and Ruth as a civil servant.

Interestingly enough, Jael, the oldest out of the three main characters, is also the one that largely embodies the sentiments of the third triad proposed by O'Toole, being "hipper, more cosmopolitan and more deliberately provocative" (103) and generally having a more loose approach to concepts such as belonging or identity that the other characters present. Her stance and upfront behaviour representing the ideals of female freedom and breaking away from the expected social norm for women, similarly represented in the first waves of the feminist movement and The New Woman. Ruth also identifies herself as a feminist, although

her comments regarding the movement seem to be more closely tied to issues regarding working class and the Lesbian movement within feminism and society.

According to Siobhán Kilfeather (2005), the rise of the feminist movement in Ireland, in face of Woman's oppression, is directly connected to the suffering and oppression of Irish people as a whole, leading to the feminist and nationalist discourses to be intertwined with each other (98). With the Irish population under oppressive tyranny, women were always the group that was most likely to suffer the most, both as people and as property of men. Therefore, women should adhere to the nationalist fight, and use their influence to fight against Irish colonialism and oppression, in order to be able to dismantle their own individual oppression within Irish society.

An issue pointed out by the author was that many women who contested the authority of the church and the restrictive family values in regulating sexuality, reproduction, dress, demeanour, education, employment and freedom of expression, may have chosen to evade conflict through emigration rather than stay and battle for change" (100). Their evading only delayed the fight for women's rights in the country. The rise of the feminist movement in Ireland started in 1820, gaining traction in the 1870's with the first instalment of the suffrage movement, leading to the rise of The New Woman, a term coined by Sarah Grand, indicating a new generation of women who believed in women's suffrage, abolition of the double standard in sexual matters, rational dress and educational opportunities for women.

The 20th century brings change and progress for both movements. The Irish Women's Franchise league made a point to connect to nationalisms to the national independence movement, and there were multiple women's liberations groups with different focus and interests, such as socialist and communist parties, domestic violence protection and campaigns for gays and lesbian liberation. Although there were some internal conflicts, Kilfeather points out that many women felt like they had to pick between the feminist fight and their other political stances (100), the fight had a front that laws united enough to win a few battles for women's rights, such as the Irish Free State constitution, established in 1922, that conceded equal franchise rights for women, and the much delayed legalization of divorce in Ireland in 1996, one year after the setting of *Stir-Fry*, in response to the constitution of 1937, which placed a strong emphasis on marriage as a response to the recurring debate over divorce in the Irish senate.

The 20th century was also, however, marked by extreme setbacks, mostly pushed by the Catholic agenda. The Catholic Church was devastating for the new Irish Free State. After independence, the Catholic Church sought an extended moral control in order to compensate

for the loss of its historical role as the public voice of a wronged nation. When faced with multiple revolutionary discourses that questioned the social structures of Ireland until that moment, the response of the Catholic Church was to identify itself closely with a vision of an essential Irish character and to demonize the attractions of liberalism or socialism as quintessentially ‘foreign’. It chose to battle secularism in terms of regulating sexuality, and it entwined discourses of racial purity, national pride and patriarchal authority.

In 1979, the Pope John Paul II visited Ireland and advised them to preserve the country's distinctive Catholic values, leading to the conservative forces mobilized to contest any moves towards reforming Ireland into a more secular and liberal state during the 80s and 90s. The referendum of 1983 restates the rights of the unborn fetus rights and the ban on divorce, both implementations that would remain for over a decade. Abortion was only legalized in Ireland in 2018.

To further corroborate to Gibbons's statements in the first analysis chapter of this dissertation, Kilfeather notes that in Ireland, the vote was not an indication of strongly held moral views but rather of an unwillingness to face change (O’Brien in Kilfeather, 110). It was not a matter of Ireland no longer being Catholic, the Catholic religion and habitus was still very much in place although starting to decline, but a matter of Irish society's resistance in letting go of the past and moving forward with new ideals and social perspective. Popular journalism played a role in policing normative heterosexual values and demonising figures in public life, especially politicians, who might challenge the supremacy of family life (111). There was a disparate difference between the public opinion as expressed in elections and referendums, and the opinions expressed in radio phone-ins and opinion polls, suggesting that Citizens searched for “the gap between church and state, hoping to preserve the vision of morally pure Ireland, separate from the practice of private morality’ (112). It made sense then, that while the Catholic habitus seemed to decline and society seemed to ‘progress’ and modernize, especially in face of the rise of globalization, the government rules and dictations, that guided the rest of society, were still highly conservative and tied to the Catholic Church standards, allowing for religious values and moral views to shape the Irish society and Identity. To Ireland, nationalism and religion were intertwined, walking hand in hand, whether their interests were in conflict or in agreement, they were inseparable.

According to Tom Inglis (2005), religion has been a fundamental aspect of Irish identity. It has been highly influencing “what people have done and said over the past two hundred years” (59). As previously discussed, Christianity has been a central aspect of Irish life, dictating family dynamics, education, health care and social welfare and even the

national holiday, to the point that Ireland's national day is Saint Patrick's Day. It also holds a large influence on important, daily choices, such as the schools people attended, the friends they had and who they married. It is part of the core beliefs and behaviours of society, being essential for its identity.

When it comes to Modern Ireland, Inglis states that religious identity has been as socially significant as gender, class, ethnicity or sexual orientation. According to Inglis, "What mattered was not so much that Irish people were labelled as Catholic or Protestant, but that they were good Catholics and Protestants and could be identified within their communities as having accumulated spiritual capital." (59). Therefore, it is not only a matter of faith - it is a matter of being 'good', and also a matter of being identifiable by others as good. Believing in Christ is not enough, one must behave and look according to a distinct pattern and set of norms, in order to be recognized by good Christians as a part of their group. Religious identity is more about belonging, than the act of believing in itself. It is a decisive characteristic that places their social roles and shapes their personal identity, especially when the subject is part of a group (as in a nation, city or family) whose collective identity is tightly connected to their religious belief, and how they act upon it. In Ireland, and especially the rural areas, routine and everyday life is based on their religious identity, and an essential part of their history, being intertwined in all levels of society. In other words, to Maria, who was raised in such an environment, being a good Christian and following the rules is tied to who she is. It is not even such a matter of believing in the religion, but a matter of acting and behaving according to the standards of behaviour that were set for her to have.

"Christian duty," Yvonne told her with a theatrical sigh. "But listen, about mass. Do you still go?"

"Of course. I mean, yes," she went on more warily. She dipped to pick up a squashed can.

"No, I just wondered, because so many people seem to stop as soon as they get to college."

Maria found an overflowing bin and tucked the can into a corner, while she considered. "Do you go?"

"God, yes, but then, I'm living at home," said Yvonne defensively. "My mother would have a coronary on the spot if I refused."

"I sort of like it, especially if there's a good folk choir. It's peaceful."

"Yeah, but are you very into the religious part of it? Do you actually believe

in, what's the word, the bread turning into his body?"

"I suppose I do." Maria's voice was *suddenly uncertain*. "Nobody's asked me that since I was seven and wearing my First Holy Communion veil.(...) Which reminds me, I've *missed* mass. Still, my mother used to say it's all right if you visit a cathedral instead, so I suppose they have their uses." (48)

This is an interesting piece of conversation between Maria and Yvonne, that shows their relationship regarding church and religious habits now that they are away from home and therefore is no longer an obligation reinforced by family. Yvonne makes it clear that she only still attends mass because she is still living under her family's roof, but when she asks Maria, her instinct is to say yes - because it is true. However, immediately Maria hesitates after, as it is clearly something she does out of habit and not quite for religious purpose. This becomes even more clear when Yvonne asks her if she truly believes in the religious aspect of it, and Maria says 'I suppose I do', with no certainty at all in her voice. Therefore, this small interaction serves to establish early on the fact that Maria herself is not really religious and therefore her habits and bigoted beliefs that are created in conservative religious environments come out of practice and habit, more so than out of true faith.

This is also a habit that, as foreshadowed by Yvonne, slowly begins to die as Maria's life in the city begins to pick up and get busier, and as she gets closer to her roommates. As we see throughout the novel and in future excerpts, the longer Maria stays in Dublin and learns more about who she is away from the environment she was raised in, the more she distances herself from those beliefs. By living a completely new life, away from all of that, she slowly falls out of her old customs, such as stops attending mass, and questions the bigoted beliefs that might have been influenced by a highly religious environment. As a consequence, the Catholic Habitus stops being a priority

Another additional interesting detail is Maria's comment right in the end regarding her mother's views on being able to substitute a proper mass by simply going to a cathedral. That short remark informs us that her mother also seems to attend mass for the habit, the tradition - it is not as much about the belief, but more about the practice and image of being religious.

It is clear, then, that Irish society is shaped and reigned by Religious interest, that needs to be fulfilled in order for one to fit in successfully. As explained by Inglis, the way in which religious interests are fulfilled depends in the first instance on the ideas that exist about religion within a culture. In Ireland's case, due to its history and struggle, religious identity has been tied in with the fulfilment of a wide spectrum of other interests. It is used to

maintain alliances and social networks, thus establishing what the author calls ‘social capital, as well as obtaining awards, honour and respect, particularly, thus becoming cultural and symbolic capital (61).

Inglis makes reference to Bourdieu’s work, and the emphasis on the importance of collective consciousness or ‘habitus’, when influencing practice. According to the author, in order to obtain capital in any area of life, it is essential that one embodies the particular habitus of that area (62). When applying this to religion, this habitus is made of spiritual and moral behaviours that are acted upon through social interactions. Naturally, this habitus is acted and perceived differently by each individual depending on the context, as well as a means of attaining religious capital (62). In the context of Ireland, and in the excerpts analysed in this chapter, it becomes clear that the religious habitus is acted by Maria and other characters as a way to establish their identity and their moral positioning on certain subjects. Inglis also quotes Weber when describing Churches as ‘compulsory organizations’, in the sense that “they have rationally established rules. Membership and the embodiment of these rules during socialization produce identity, and a sense of self.” (63), This becomes very clear when we see Maria starts to miss mass and slowly drift away from religious behaviour, and when she mentions in passing how much of a social event it was for her to attend mass in her hometown, and that her mother excuses missing mass as long as she goes on to visit a cathedral instead, then it will be alright.

The enactment of the religious habitus through acts such as attending mass are essential not because they are used in order to exercise one’s faith, but because they enforce the social image of a good religious person that Maria, and other characters, have grown to believe to be the only acceptable way to behave. For Inglis, when it comes to the relationship between Ireland and religion, and how that affects social behaviour and perception, it is not a simple matter of the church upholding a dominant position in almost all the fields that impacted society, such as health, education, media and politics, but it is also about how the church had “the power to influence and emphasize the importance of religious capital within these fields.” (67).

Especially in the case of small, homogeneous societies from smaller towns, represented by the rural areas of Ireland which Maria comes from, the influence of the church in Irish society was based on Irish people seeing themselves first and foremost as Catholics. Due to the lack of diversity in terms of religion or even non-religious lifestyles more present in larger cities like Dublin, the withholds of religion in society is even stronger, and thus behaving or being different by not following the cultural expectations would make one stand

out more and seen more negatively, consequently being excluded. According to Inglis “the embodiment of this Catholic habitus became central to the operation of civil society, institutions, interest groups, and debate and discussion in the public sphere” (68). The embodiment of this Catholic habitus became a personal matter, a central element of cultural capital and following and enacting became essential to one’s survival and achievement within society. As a consequence of that, the “religious identity fused not just with the fulfilment of religious interests, but with economic, political, social and cultural interests.” (69).

These norms and habits create an extremely exclusionary society, that further reinforces the feeling of alterity, as described by the sociologist Eric Landowski (2002). According to Landowski, the feeling of alterity, the concept of what constitutes as the Other and the origin of the difference in between models of patronization are established by a group of reference - generally constituted by white, heterosexual and, in the case of Ireland, Catholic. All societies establish certain norms that Landowski (2002) calls ‘social practices’. These practices, when facing the relationship between subjects in a specific situation, become very asymmetrical and unequal. They bring to light the difference and discrimination. The group of reference are the ones in the position to establish these norms, as well as the label of a scale of identity stereotypes. Through these, they establish themselves in opposition to other individuals or particular communities and create avatars of prediction of the other (39). According to the author to be is, necessarily, ‘be for the other’. It is to be seen, evaluated and classified based on different categories that organize the social space, as determined by the group of reference (42).

The slicing of the Catholic habitus

The next Sunday she woke late *again*. She was sleeping a ridiculous amount these days, as if hibernating for the winter. She fumbled with the loose handle of the top drawer, reaching in for her watch. Ten past eleven, too late to have to decide whether to go to mass. Besides, she could hear the rain against the glass. Maria scratched the fuzz at the nape of her neck. (111)

Further developing what has been presented in the novel, we now see that Maria has slowly stopped attending mass, letting her tiredness and lazier side get the best of her. After a few months in the city, going to church is no longer a priority for her, no more than getting actual rest is. It is also significant that after waking up, instead of going to mass as originally

planned, she decides to hang out with Jael, hanging out and learning more about the other and about Ruth. Her friendship and positive feelings regarding her roommates are very clearly starting to overcome her religious background and priorities. We can also see that this is a repeating event, as it happens once again in the next chapter.

Noticing the date, she realised she had *missed* yet another Holy Day of Obligation. It wasn't that she was *deliberately* lapsing, more that she found it hard *to motivate* herself to get up in time for mass without company. At home, it was *automatic*; the whole village plodded through the car park in unison at two minutes to ten on a Sunday. But here she knew nobody to go with. The other day she had mentioned it to Ruth, who explained that for her it was not exactly *loss of faith* either, more *the fact* that the latest pastoral letter from the bishops had advised Catholics to *abhor homosexual* activity but have *compassion* for the congenital homosexual, and if that was all the church had to offer, they could stuff it up their cassocks. Ruth still went to mass whenever she spent Sunday with her mother, of course; she couldn't not.

Maria decided to worry about religion some other time. (125)

The narration delves a bit deeper into Maria's relationship with the church, as well as her roommate Ruth. Upon reflecting on her constant abandonment of attending mass, she realizes that she finds it hard to motivate herself to go without company. This, once again, shows how attending mass is more of a matter of social habit and something that is done a certain way because it has always been done like that or because it is socially seen as the right thing to do, instead of an action that comes out of faith and deeply religious and spiritual boundary.

This 'abandonment' is not present only in Maria's storyline. According to Inglis, the proportion of Catholics attending Sunday Mass declined from 91%, in 1974, to a little over 60% during the second half of the 1990s. While we can see that the Catholic habitus is still pretty much present in society and the presenting of self through the novel, this decline reflects a shift in how strongly the habitus is enforced and internalized, being integrated into people's routine mostly for social acceptance. Although the habitus still serves as a moral compass for most of the society, as time progresses most do not "adhere to many of the teachings of the church, particularly in relation to sexual morality." (73). As a result, there is a rising sense of hypocrisy through the novel that Maria slowly comes to realize, as the

character notices how much of an afterthought the religious practice actually is, while the religious morals - including the prejudice - is still strongly enforced in society.

As seen in one of the excerpts analysed in the previous chapter, Maria states that most of her peer from her hometown that also migrated to Dublin to go to university are studying agriculture, an information that needs no further development or over-explanation as it makes perfect sense considering that their place of origin is the rural area of Ireland and therefore its economy and society is mostly focused on farming and agriculture. As previously established, the difference in the choice of courses is just one of the many factors that differentiate Maria from the people of her hometown, further corroborating her sense of estrangement.

Although the conflict of Rural versus Urban, and the resulting effects on Maria's sense of Self and Other, were explored in the previous chapter, the matter of religion interferes and ties this issue together in the history of Ireland and in the novel.

As explained by Inglis, one of the many ways in which the Catholic Church withheld its power over society was through establishing the strong Catholic identity throughout farmers, connecting the development of their economic capital to their ability to develop cultural social and symbolic capital, which could be obtained and reinforced through the religious habits (65). This social system heavily encouraged and relied on children inheriting their fathers land and so further maintained and developed it within the family - that is to say that those who married away did not receive a parcel of land. As a result, the development of the economic capital became dependent on controlling marriage and therefore relied on controlling all different aspects such as sexual relations and emotional control. As achieving religious capital became the dominant form of embodied cultural capital, self-denial and 'bodily discipline' became central behaviour, goal and rule for society (65). Therefore, the enforcement of the Catholic habitus was, and it remained its strongest in rural areas of Ireland, not only due to the lack of diversity previously mentioned but also because of the perseverance of the social system that was based on controlling bodies and sexual lives, more specifically women's, in order to maintain the standard pattern of marriage and childbearing that would inherit the land, keeping in the farming industry and feeding the local economy.

As the basis of economical force becomes more and more focused on industries of manufacture and services, society becomes more urbanized and the social expectation and regimentation of celibacy, marriage and sexual behaviour ease in the urban centres. At the same time, the Catholic habitus dominance over society slowly starts to slipper through the church grip, as religion and the Catholic sense of self (based on the Catholic habitus) is

replaced by “a new sense of self, based on self-realisation and fulfilment” (73), achieved through career, socialization and personal goals that differ from what had been socially established as the only possible lifestyle to have until then.

The impact of the feminist movement soars in the second half of the 20th century, leading women to gain more freedom and access to different ways to obtain financial freedom, therefore no longer having to rely on marriage for survival, also contributed to the decrease of the importance of the religious capital in the Irish society. The image of a new Irish woman rises in Irish culture, represented in the novel by characters such as the confident, adventurous and artistic Jael and the assertive, independent and activist Ruth. If the old Irish social system, which is mostly still in place in the rural areas of Ireland, praises the hiding and denying of feelings, emotions and all things related to sexuality, the new system reveals, analyses and explores them (73). In *Stir-fry*, we see Maria get shocked and struggle with the stark change in between the system in which she was raised and the one she is currently living in.

In contrast to Maria, Ruth is someone that deliberately avoids church unless she has no other option - her reason being the Catholic Church's history of deep hatred and homophobia. It is not an unconscious abandonment of habit as attending mass becomes less of a priority, like in Maria's case, but more of a point of taking a stand. Ruth is not ashamed of who she is, and she won't stand for an organization that openly abhors people like her, proposing an interesting contrast with Maria, that has yet to even realize that she is not heterosexual, at this point in the novel.

In the analysed excerpts in which the aspect of religion, and its rituals, is directly mentioned we can see that the character clearly feels unmotivated regarding keeping up with her old habits. It is a feeling that grows through time, due to lack of the previous social pressure and commitment to attend mass, as well as Maria slowly distancing herself from the ideals that were preached in her environment growing up, creating an unconscious but larger distance between the new and the old Self. As seen by her reflection upon Ruth's positioning regarding religion, Maria seems to start to see religion as something that also excludes those that she has grown to care about, and even who she possibly might be. If in the last chapter we see Maria feeling detached from her family, and as a foreigner, in this one we see her feeling foreign from her religion, Other to Christianity.

Oil and water, the cross and the blade - In face of the different

Despite this feeling of foreignness to religion and the rituals and ideals encompassed by such, it is important to note that Maria still believes and embodies many of the prejudices and the 'prone to judgment of the other' attitude encouraged by the Catholic church. Due to the social setting pre-established by the national movement and reinforced by the patriarchal ideals of the Catholic church previously mentioned, especially in the beginning of the novel, the character can be seen reacting very negatively to those who act differently from her or from her expectations. In this sense, although we can see her later on slowly letting go of these ideals and prejudices due to learning more about the Other and her Self, her religious and geographical background still work as a blade that cuts off the Other by judging them and presenting a negative reaction to their existence.

Maria's conservative morals and her internalized misogyny, old-fashioned beliefs that were (and still are) quite common in the rural area of strongly religious countries such as Ireland, are very clearly depicted in her interactions with her friends and colleagues, such as in her first meeting with Galway, another student who was sent by his grandma to study in Dublin in order to connect with his Irish roots. On her first week of classes, Maria witnesses another female student go through a school ritual called 'the witch dunking', in which young women are submerged on the school fountain to perform an integration ritual and welcome the freshman into the school.

"I'm Galway (...) Were you watching the ritual *witch-dunking*?" He jerked his eyes toward the lake.

"She's no witch, she's a *bimbo*," retorted Maria, more *viciously* than she meant.

One bushy eyebrow lifted. "Do you know her?"

"*She was laughing, for god's sake*. How could she let them toss her into all that oil and sludge, and then laugh?"

"Maybe she didn't have much of a *choice*. If she's going to be in their class for four years, she won't want a *reputation* for not being able to take a joke."

"Well, I think it's *sick*." She *eased* into a *smile* as they began drifting toward the long grey buildings. "Do you want to, I mean, I was just going for a *cup of tea*." (25)

The character has a strong reaction to the unknown woman giving an uncomfortable laugh after being witch dunked by her colleagues - being quick to judge and call her a 'bimbo', assuming that the woman is flirting, instead of considering it to be a simple reaction made out of survival instinct, like Galway points out. Although the character has been presented as very sweet until this moment, when facing this reaction that deviates from what she considers to be the correct, expected behaviour, Maria grows angry and aggressive in her comments. It becomes very evident that, although she was moved to a different city seeking what's new and diverse, she has yet to fully learn how to deal with those who truly are different or act differently from her own cultural standards.

Ironically enough, although Maria presents an averse reaction to the sight of the 'flirtatious behaviour', right after this interaction Maria immediately smiles at Galway (a man that she has just met), and indirectly asks him out for a cup of tea. Her response clearly comes from a negative view of women in general and a conservative judgment of what's appropriate or not, then her true opinion. It is a quick reaction generated out of years of conditioning by being raised in a conservative environment, that judges, classifies and dismisses women, determining what is proper or not proper for them to do, act or be. This presents an interesting contrast that can perhaps be tied back to the partition and conflict of Self previously mentioned in Fintan O'Toole's triad. Maria judges other women for acting flirtatious, deeming it negative due to her conservative background and the overall need to police other women's bodies and behaviour that come ingrained in misogynistic culture promoted by the Catholic Church. At the same time, she feels the impulse to act overly friendly and slightly flirtatious herself, due to the compulsive idea of getting a boyfriend (and possibly future husband).

It wasn't her fault; she was in no sense spying. She couldn't help but see the shape they made. Her eyes tried to *untangle* its elements. Ruth, cross-legged on the table, her back curved like a comma, and Jael, leaning into it, kissing her. There was no *wild passion*; that might have shaken her *less*. Just the slow bartering of lips on the rickety table where Ruth chopped garlic every night. (...)

"I'm home, folks," she yelled, loud and cheery as Doris Day. They *behaved perfectly* too, strolling out of the kitchen with armfuls of library books as if they had been *rehearsing* this little scene all their lives. Which,

now she came to think of it, they *probably* had. (...)

Almost a month, Maria thought. Four entire weeks, and she hadn't copped on, not even after overhearing that first conversation. Nearly thirty days of conversations, blown kisses, suppers, private jokes. The quilt was heavy on her eyelids, blotting out the light. What ludicrous naivete, even for seventeen. How could she not have known? And then, embarrassment swinging to anger, the question reversed: How the hell was she meant to know? (68-69)

This scene is one of the most essential parts of the novel - It is the scene that sets the story and Maria's journey of self discovery in motion, as well as going extensively on how non-heterosexual women had been presented and portrayed in Maria's life until that very moment. In it, Maria accidentally walks in on her roommates kissing on the kitchen table, which leads her to finally realize they are a couple.

As she realizes what's happening, Maria notes that there is no wild passion in the kiss, and that she would have been less shocked if there was. A kiss without passion meant familiarity, repeated action, routine. Ruth and Jael's kiss was not an impulsive act, an experiment that had never happened before and would most likely never happen again. It was something normal that had clearly happened many times before, the sign of an established relationship. Moments later, when Maria finally takes courage to walk into the kitchen (after making plenty of noise, so they would know she had arrived home), she also notes that they both behaved perfectly normal, like nothing happened, 'as if they had rehearsed this little scene their whole lives' and then concludes that 'now that she came to think of it, they probably had'. From these couple sentences alone, it becomes clear that Maria recognizes that people in non-heterosexual relationships are not well-seen, or safe, and therefore must learn and be used to hide and act as if nothing happened, as if they are straight or just friends, quickly and easily, in order to not arise any sort of suspicion.

Later on, when trying to sleep, Maria recalls the event as a 'tableau', a scandalous scene that she tries to forget although it keeps flickering in her mind. Maria thinks that what bothers her is that "there was no distance" (69) - it bothers her that the act happened inside and up close to her in reality, in a way that she could not ignore it, the kiss and the intimacy and familiarity of it left no space for her to look away. There was no way to deny or walk around it and pretend it was something else. In the end, Maria is left wondering how she could possibly have missed the information, "how could she not have known?" (69). She

berates herself for her naivety and lack of observation skills, after a month and seeing multiple evidence and hearing a conversation in between the roommates regarding telling her directly about them or not during her first night in the flat.

Right after this thought, however, her embarrassment turns into anger and the question reverses: how was she supposed to know? Surely her roommates didn't really tell her directly, although there was plenty of evidence and Maria herself recognizes that non-heterosexual people probably have to practice pretending to be straight thorough their whole lives. Besides that, she also recognizes that her background and the environment in which she was raised in has never prepared her to even see non-heterosexual women as a group of people that existed in real life, even less to recognize when living with one.

Nevertheless, she gets extremely frustrated by the whole ordeal, and this anger seems to slowly shift towards her roommates and then later on towards her cultural background. There is this resentment for her upbringing, unsure if the tradition was wrong for not teaching her that or this new era was wrong for not abiding to tradition. We can find the same sentiment being written decades before in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde, when Dorian realizes his own same-sex desires through his observation and self reflection regarding his attraction to Lord Henry, and thinks frustrated: "Why had it been left for a stranger to reveal himself to him" (Wilde, 1890, 28). Both characters echo almost the same questions, the same indignance at themselves for not knowing, not realizing something that had been right in front of their eyes and that they should have seen before. How was Maria supposed to know? Why hadn't she realized before?

Certain phrases soothed her, she found, as she lay there trying to formulate a policy. *Consenting adults, that was a steadying one, along with nobody's business but their own.* Different strokes, she thought, then rejected it as too vivid an image. What was the phrase the Northerner came up with at the women's group? *Mutual acceptance, that was it. She would accept them and they would accept her and not flaunt it in her face or push it down her throat.* Maria halted the words flooding through her head. That wasn't what she meant. *All she wanted was not to be afraid and embarrassed in her own flat.* Flaunting, pushing, that made it sound like a stick. But she didn't know how else to visualise it. An open-winged hawk, a double cherry, a two-way mirror? A kiss on a kitchen table, that was all she had to go on. *Somewhere between private and public, terrible and tender.* Maria sat up and pulled the curtain

fully open. She leaned back, letting the cold wallpaper startle her skin awake.
(73)

Maria attempts to come to terms with her recent discovery considering her roommates relationship status. She uses 'soothing phrases', that are mostly right but also imply that there is something morally wrong with the relationship. She also states that she would 'accept them' if they didn't 'flaunt it in her face or push it down her throat' (although she is unsatisfied with the image created), which is a classical conservative rhetoric when trying to tone down homophobia: "Nothing against it, as long as in between their own bedroom, as long as I don't have to be reminded that it exists". Maria thinks she'll respect them, but seems to think so only under the conditions that Ruth and Jael hide their relationship and keep it in the closet. She thinks that she doesn't want to be afraid or embarrassed in her own house, seemingly forgetting that not only the couple lived there as well, but before Maria even lived there. In conclusion, Maria has no idea how to react or what to think, she mostly just wants to erase it from her memory, to pretend that it is not real and that their roommates are still her roommates, instead of a couple, so she doesn't have to deal with the possibility of homosexuality existing. In essence, she perceives the world as an extension of her perspective, and wants things to abide by her understanding of what they are.

In the previous chapter and in the introduction of this one, I elaborated on how the rural area of Ireland, paired with the strictness of Christianity, work together in order to create a structure that further promotes prejudice and stereotypes. Although that is true, as previously argued, it is important to call attention to the fact that this does not mean that urban centres of Ireland, such as Dublin, were not queerphobic. Jack Halberstam (2005), utilizes the term 'queer metronormativity' to show the dominant story of migration from rural areas to urban areas in queer narratives that often show a spatial move within, in "which the subject moves to a place of tolerance after enduring life in a place of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy" (37). Halberstam is critical of such narratives, as they create the illusion that urban lifestyle are extremely open and liberating, and are therefore the safe haven of the queer community, where they would inherently be accepted - which is not true. Although urban centres do present more acceptance and visibility, due to the gay rights movements and a general higher acceptance of diversity in general (Barret, 2005, 446) that is not to say that there is no bigotry in urban environments. A perfect example to prove that would be Yvonne, Maria's friend who is from the city and although being less naive and more inhibited than Maria (she declares that only goes to mass due to being obligated by family and it is heavily

implied she is sexually active, having a boyfriend and flirting with different men throughout the novel), she still embodies many of the prejudices and reproduces negative stereotypes when talking about Maria's roommates, as can be seen on the next excerpt.

"Oh, good Jesus." Yvonne's voice went spiralling up to the top of the lecture theatre, and several bored faces turned to stare. "You're telling me they're lesbians? Both of them?"

"Will you shut the fuck up?" snarled Maria under her breath. "No need to tell the whole of first arts."

The professor peered up in their direction, then resumed his monologue. Yvonne leaned over toward Maria's ear. "*You poor creature*," she whispered, "you must have been so *embarrassed* when they told you. How did they bring it up—which of them actually said it?"

Engrossed by the carvings on the desk, she stumbled over the syllables. "They didn't have to tell me in so many words, you know, it just sort of became clear."

Yvonne nodded. "Of course, you're pretty *perceptive*, you'd be quick to pick up the clues. Body language. Had you noticed anything, like, *revealing* before?"

"*They're perfectly normal people otherwise*." Maria looked up suspiciously. "And you're not to spread it round campus."

"I wouldn't." Yvonne's voice was hurt. "I can just imagine how I'd feel if a rumor went round college about me—I'd be sure everyone was staring (...) I just hope no one jumps to *the wrong conclusions* about you, Maria. (...) Just because you live with them, I mean. Not that anyone would be likely to, since you've got *hair down to your shoulders* and you *often wear skirts*. Well, fairly often."

Maria rested her forehead on the heel of her hand. "Look, they're both very nice. And *they wear skirts sometimes too*."

"Oh, I know," said Yvonne wisely, "but they'd have to, wouldn't they, as *cover*?" (76-77)

The previous scene depicts some of the homophobia that is present also in big cities such as Dublin, and a plethora of stereotypes. Yvonne clearly feels very bad for Maria, as if she has gone through a tragedy or mortifying situation instead of simply finding out her roommates relationship status. She also, hilariously, assumes that Maria noticed on her own due to her 'pretty perceptive' nature, which the readers and Maria herself know is absolutely not true. When Yvonne mentions aspects such as 'body language', Maria counters back that her roommates are 'perfectly normal people otherwise' - meaning that non-heterosexual people are not normal.

As the conversation moves on, Yvonne tells Maria that she simply hopes that no one would 'get the wrong idea' about Maria, and assuming that Maria was not heterosexual because of her roommates. This not only implies the idea that non-heterosexual people would group together, as in if Maria was heterosexual she would never share a house with non-heterosexual people, but reinforces once again the idea that being seen as non-heterosexual is inherently bad.

Going deeper into the stereotypes, Yvonne points out that people would not naturally assume that Maria was a lesbian because she has long hair and wear skirts often. Maria counters that her roommates also wear skirts sometimes, and Yvonne quickly replies that they would have to, in order to pass as heterosexuals. This short piece of dialogue feeds into the stereotype that non-heterosexual women, more specifically lesbians, are very masculine and would not wear typically feminine fashion such as skirts or longer hair. It circles back to Butler's theory of materialization (1993), and how the construction of gender norms is made by the constant reiteration of these same norms through time, and this reiteration both produces and destabilizes how society perceives sex and gender norms, leading to 'naturalized effect' (12), and to a destabilization despite this effect. As a direct consequence of this reiteration, these constructive develop instabilities, such as the belief that women should be feminine, but women that are homosexual should not. In an extension of what has been seen in previous excerpts regarding women, and what it means to be one, these rules and guidelines of gender consequently create the social perspective of sexuality, and stereotypes regarding sexual identities. Subjects that present homosexual desires are assumed to perform their identity more aligned with the opposite gender, as in, women that are attracted to other women would present themselves in more masculine ways.

Once again, the characters seem to understand that there is a very small and restricted image of what some type of people look like or can look like, not allowing for diversity or exceptions when it comes to certain groups of people. This only helps to create a more solid and specific image of the 'Other', creating a formula of what is a non-heterosexual woman, what is a heterosexual woman and then later on what are the rights or wrongs to be a woman and exist.

She had nothing against her flatmates, she thought; they lit up the rooms and made them ring with laughter. *But the fact remained that she didn't know what to do or be with them. Anger bubbled up in her stomach. It was a*

bit much that they hadn't warned her before she moved in. Unless—of course, that wretched ad, it must have been some sort of code. Well, how was she supposed to know? It didn't seem too naive to assume that a women's symbol meant women, and no bigots meant generally liberal people.

The phrase turned her mouth cold, as she leaned against a notice board. It meant her. *Well, if she was a bigot, she couldn't help it. She didn't understand, she didn't know what to think or why she thought it, she didn't even know the right terminology for it. Oh, damn and blast it, why couldn't they teach this sort of thing at school? (78)*

Maria's focus moves on to her relationship with her roommates directly. They are undeniably good and fun people, but knowing about their sexuality makes Maria so deeply uncomfortable she can't even be in the same room as them. Once again, she is filled with anger and frustration at the fact that she wasn't previously warned and that in her opinion there was no way that she could have possibly known.

Maria reflects on the ad for the apartment and hangs on the words 'no bigots'. Back then, she had seen it as meaning 'generally liberal people', but now she sees it as meaning someone that doesn't hold prejudice and bias against different types of minorities. It dawns on her that she is acting as a bigot - and that she can't really help it. She was raised in an environment that taught her to be a bigot, she has been surrounded by conservative ideology and prejudiced discourse her whole life. She didn't understand, and couldn't understand, because her cultural background had never taught her to understand or accept people that were different from her. Even though she claims to go to Dublin looking for change and difference in the beginning of the book, it is clear that dealing with such, and her own personal bias as well, is much more difficult than she expected. She even makes it clear that to her this change won't be affecting the fundamentals of her being. A staunch believer that some of the rules she grew up under are to be universal and absolute, regardless of the differences in the city.

According to Said (1994), people exist between the 'old' and the 'new', the contexts in which they are present, articulating the tensions, irresolutions and contradictions in the territories on which their cultural maps are positioned. Maria exists between her "I" created in the rural area of Ireland, and therefore reproducing the traditions and values of this original culture, and her "I" who resides in a busy and diverse urban environment. In this place, she

lives with queer people but identifies herself as such for the first time when facing her own desire. That is an issue that shall be explored further in the next chapter.

Maria's religious background does not serve as a base for fervorous faith, but for almost frivolous standards and set behaviours that dictate and encourage the control and oppression not only of the Self but of the Other. Her religious raising and influence impose and are the root of many of Maria's problems and prejudices regarding female sexual desire, sexuality and her initial rejection of her roommate's sexualities. It can also be tied to her naivety regarding her own sexuality, although that would most likely be more influenced by the rural aspect of her raising conditions, and the lack of examples and representation with which she could identify herself.

In conclusion, as mentioned in the previous chapter and further elaborated on this one, Ireland's religious background has great impacts not only on the characters' perception of society and how it works (or should work) but their perception of themselves and, therefore, how they position themselves in society, acting through the Catholic Habitus. This set of behaviours are acted upon mostly through almost coercive social establishments, regardless if the characters harbour strong religious faith or not - it is directly tied to their social identity, rather than the act of believing of the possible consequences that they might face if they did not act like good Christians. This directly impacts Maria as, although she still holds onto prejudices and stereotypes regarding women and Queer people that are reinforced by the church, it is very clear that her strongest tie with the Catholic Habitus is not through her own faith, but the social aspect generated by living in a small community in the rural area that constantly and consistently acted upon them as a community. Re-enacting these deeds, such as attending Mass every Sunday, was something done as a community and therefore she, as part of the community, enacted them as well. As these actions stop being part of her routine, however, she slowly not only stops going to Mass, but she forgets about it - making it clear that her faith or sense of Self is not hurt by the change in behaviour. Maria also starts questioning religion as a whole, as she gets closer to her roommate Ruth, and sees how she is rejected by the church due to her sexuality when she is, in fact, a good person. Through getting to know someone that her upbringing has openly painted as someone evil, Maria comes to the small realization regarding how biased and not exactly true her view from the Other had been until now. This is a small step that will, later on, lead towards her further development of awareness regarding her own Self.

Religion, much like oil, separates. Like the Catholic ritual of Confirmation, it constantly reaffirms and marks one's place within religion, and separated from the rest. It

places identity into a box, regulating how one should be, act and look like, in order to control bodies and beliefs on a large scale. It is the basis in establishing social structures that further promotes stereotypes, diminishing and defining identities and identifications through separation, not allowing people to be more, to exist beyond the confines of the church. And, although seemingly less present in urban areas, due to the eventual decay and decline of the Catholic habitus, it is still pretty much present in all areas, spaces and levels of society. Maria grows up not only being blind to a part of her own self, her sapphic desire for other women being cut off from the idea of existing since childhood, but also being blind to the Other, prejudging and drowning off parts of people that do not fit her view of the world, limiting their existence, so it is easier for her to digest, so they fit what she has been taught. It is only through exposing herself to the difference, although unaware of it, that she is able to cut herself off from the mindset ingrained into her by the church, setting herself free. It is only then that Maria becomes aware enough to be able to see people fully for who they are, in all their differences and expansions that do not fit the Catholic ideals and the stereotypes proposed, and start seeing and allowing herself to explore and be who she really is.

CHAPTER III

Pan - Frying

Cooking, either by pan frying or through any other technique, is one of the final steps in a recipe, moving it further towards the complete dish. It is putting all the ingredients together in one pan, mixing and frying them, in order to make it into something new altogether. It finishes off the preparation stage of a plate, bringing together all different layers and ingredients.

To cook requires understanding of fire - too hot, and it will burn, too cold and the food will be undercooked. Furthermore, to cook means to put the ingredients under the influence of heat. It requires the fire, dominated, which can be tied to two different main aspects in the novel. First, it was the ability to control and manipulate fire that humanity was able to evolve, a Promethean development that brought us freedom and agency before our environment. The same can be seen in Maria's development through the novel, as the character starts to stand up more and more for herself, distancing herself from the conservative and prejudiced beliefs that had been shoved down her throat her whole life.

Secondly, fire can also be tied to desire. Maria's biggest breakthrough comes not only because of her exposure to her roommates and realizing that they are normal people and their sexuality is not actually something bad, but also through her realization of her own sexual desire and romantic feelings towards them. The events that begin to be developed in the chapter 'Heating' of the novel, and are only even more developed in future chapters, all deal with the matter of desire, of wanting and being wanted physically - something that Maria had failed to present regarding her male counterparts throughout the entire novel, even though she had been set to find, date and eventually marry one of them. As established in the previous chapters, Maria comes to Dublin with specific views of a divided society, having a

preconception of where she belongs, how she should act and relaying a moral alignment to different identities, categorizing groups that were not commonly presented to her through her youth as the Other, and more often than not seeing them negatively.

Much like the act of stir-frying, throughout her time in Dublin the character ends up slowly mixing more and more with different individuals, gradually erasing the strong barriers and spaces in between her and what she had considered being the Other. As a direct consequence of having her world views challenged, her view of her own Self also suffers a transformation. As identities are constantly changing in a cyclical process of construction and deconstruction when faced with new and different existences in contrast to their own, it is only natural that Maria's perception of the Other and of the Self would change, even if she hadn't found herself in such a complex situation. To recall Stuart Hall's work, Identities are "never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices, and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation" (4).

Through these dialogues, we see then how clearly Maria has changed throughout her time in Dublin, as she stops presenting her identity as a 'game that ought to be played against difference' (Hall, 2002, 17), but instead articulating in relation to difference. The Other becomes not something negative, but rather something neutral, that simply exists.

Mixing it together and the new perspectives

"Have you decided whether you'll be moving out?" (...) "You are still upset about them, aren't you?"

"I wish you wouldn't call them *'Them'*, like they're *Martians* or something."

"I know their names, that's not the point (...) The point is, they got a month's rent out of you on false pretences."

"Ah, for god's sake, it wasn't a financial scam or anything. (...) "They probably *assumed I knew*."

"That's *outrageous*. I mean, it's not the first thing that's going to spring into your head when you go house-hunting, is it? I mean, you don't say to yourself, oh, yes, must check whether my flatmates are *lesbian lovers*, just in case!" (80)

This is an essential moment when it comes to Maria's journey of acceptance and construction of what she considers to be the 'Other'. As Yvonne pushes her about moving out and away from her roommates, Maria is specifically upset about her usage of pronouns - 'Them', referring to the girls as if they were 'Martians'. It is not that Maria is not aware that Ruth and Jael would be seen as outsiders due to their relationship, there is plenty of evidence that she is aware of the stigmas and she herself has presented bias until that very moment. It is, however, the first time in which Maria presents a discomfort with this sort of separation that becomes clear through Yvonne's tone in her use of the pronoun. We can see Maria slowly change her perception of what is the Other, seeming to feel closer to her roommates than she does to her heterosexual friend, annoyed by the clear prejudice in her statement. She no longer feels uncomfortable or attempts to create more space and separation between herself and her roommates solely because of their sexuality.

"What's to keep you there?"

"For one thing, *I like them.*"

"I know you do, Maria, you're a very friendly person." Yvonne hugged her knees in exasperation. "But they're *hardly your sort*. I mean, don't you find them *a bit, you know?*"

"A bit what?" She squirmed slightly.

"*Butch and ranty.*"

"I can't believe I'm listening to such *clichés*. You've never even met them."

"Well, I know a girl who had one in her school, and apparently she was really aggressive. Like Martina Navratilova."

"Jael wears *mascara* sometimes. And Ruth is a *dote*, I wish you knew her. OK, they're *feminists*, well, Ruth is anyway, but they don't rant. Like, the other night for example, they had no objection to my watching the Miss World contest."

"Well *of course.*"

"What do you mean, of course?"

Yvonne leaned toward her and cooed, "All those semi-naked women."

"You're sick." She shrugged her shoulders.

"I just can't believe you're being so *naive* about this, Maria. You're

defending them as if they've been your bosom pals for years.”

“At least I know them, which is more than you do. And they never wear boiler suits or”—she scanned her memory frantically—“studs in their noses or get their hair shaved off or any other clichés you might care to dredge up.” She grounds to a halt. “And neither of them has even a shadow of a moustache, so there.” (81)

The rest of the conversation does not get much better, as Yvonne continues to push and make offensive comments regarding Maria's roommates, even though she has never met them. She talks as if Maria was scammed or as if they had purposely deceived her in some way, which Maria argues that they probably assumed she knew, as she is very aware that she lacked social awareness and observation skills when first moving to Dublin. Yvonne then assumes they are 'butchy' and 'ranty' (which are neither necessarily bad things, but are here being used in a derogatory way). Despite having used stereotypes herself, Maria replies with frustration to the use of those words, calling them clichés. To this Yvonne comments about a third-party story where a girl that was allegedly a lesbian was 'apparently' aggressive - therefore mentioning a story that has actual no base or proof at all, and she was actually never there to possibly know the truth (and if it was truth, the anger would be understandable, as society does not seem to be exactly pleasant to non-heterosexual women.). Maria tries to defend her roommates the only way she knows: by pointing out how her roommates *do not* fit those stereotypes, mentioning that they do not have moustaches, wear skirts, they do not rant, and mentions that they did not even care that she watched a beauty contest - To which Yvonne replies that they probably did to watch the women in bikinis. These, paired with her previous comment implying that Ruth and Jael had purposely deceived Maria, infer a much more problematic mentality: Yvonne does not only see them as the Other and a completely separate group of society because of their sexuality, she seems to assume that they would engage in almost predatory behaviour, such as purposely mislead a naive girl in living with them or maliciously watch a fashion and beauty contest. This is possibly the most dangerous stereotype portrayed until this moment, as it goes far beyond simply assuming non-heterosexual women would look, dress or talk a specific way, but actually assumes that they are, by default, bad people. They go from being something never even considered existing on a regular daily basis to being portrayed as evil, as an enemy.

It is also important to call attention to the fact that, while Maria does appear to be very bothered by the stereotypes used by Yvonne and tries to disprove her friend's negative

assumptions regarding her roommates, her own speech still presents a lot of prejudice and misconceptions. When giving the example of the beauty contents, she makes a point of mentioning that Ruth is a feminist, giving a negative undertone to her sentence. It circles back to Maria's and Yvonne's first ever interaction, the novel's opening lines, where Yvonne explains the meaning of the women symbol as "fairly feminists, you know the sort" (1). There is an outright rejection to the movement, and to women who are connected to it in some way or another. Although unconscious, by following up her statement with "But they don't rant", Maria ends up only further perpetuating the internalized idea that feminists are women who complain about things for no reason and become thus annoying to others - a long time stereotype that invalidates not only an essential social movement, but women and their feelings and thoughts as a whole, silencing an entire gender. Worst of all is that the character does not even notice the issue in her own statement, having completely internalized the idea that people that are part of a movement that fights for women's freedom are ranty and, as consequence, annoying and judgemental. Maria's, and by extension Yvonne's, internalized misogyny is present in many excerpts throughout the novel, as seen in previous chapters, but it is especially interesting how even when Maria is doing her best to prove her roommates are good people by pointing out all the things they are not, it is still her instinct to present their presence in a movement as a counterpoint to her own arguments. This is, of course, a direct consequence of being raised in a highly patriarchal and misogynistic society that considers anything that questions the system established until then, and puts women and their needs and injustices in the center of attention, something not only negative but more specifically ridiculous and irritating, as something that deserves to be ruled out or even punishable.

Going beyond Maria's and Yvonne's internalized misogyny, this cultural environment leads to a very specific set of constructions when it comes to who counts as the Other, which leads into the use and creation of social stereotypes. According to Walter Lippman (1992), subtle, but generalized and omnipresent influences, are those that feed and maintain stereotypes. These previous conceptions orient one's social perceptions. It is exactly through this subtleness of some stereotypes, that we construct the concepts of Us vs Them (Breslin, 1991) that are the starting point for extreme negative reactions and bigotry. Although Maria does not express disgust towards her roommates or hatred per se, she does feel anger and a certain level of discomfort when she finds out about their sexuality. Although she eventually gets over these feelings and comprehends that lesbians are very much normal women, it is clear that there is an internalization of ideas and social roles that spreads as a group, therefore being incorporated and believed by most of the society, and not singularly, affecting people

from all different groups of people (Kinkenberg, 2008). Similarly, Harkot-De-La-Taille (2016) exposes that when it comes to life in smaller, rural areas, the community consists of the sense of belonging and recognition for the individual, meaning that there is a tendency to preserve social behaviour that is acceptable to a certain pattern. As larger cities tend to be more individualistic, and less community based, there is less pressure to fit in with a certain expected lifestyle or identity group, and more freedom to be oneself, although still dealing with some sort of social pressure. Furthermore, the collectivity in which one has been raised is always a parameter, regardless of the person's wishes to step away from it, like Maria does by going to Dublin. Although she is in a much larger city for a few months when she finds out about Jael and Ruth's relationship, her reaction is still mostly based on prejudice and stereotypes ingrained in her brain by the conservative culture she was raised in. She carries the beliefs of her origin, even if it does not take long for her to understand that they are not true. This construction and need for the establishment of social cohesion and tension, operating without generating any sort of antagonism, work as an intern regulation that is stimulated by fear or shame, which are sentiments motivated by values that are considered either positive or negative, based on how one sees themselves and how they are embraced by their communities. Maria holds deeply to the concept of her sexuality more than anything else for a deep shame of being different, in a way that would be considered immoral and would eventually lead to her perpetual exclusion from society. The idea of being part of such a marginalized group runs so deep inside her, that she can not even understand, let alone recognize and accept, her own desire.

Furthermore, Harkot-De-La-Taille (2016) exposes that although many social movements, such as the feminist movement, do make an effort to change social and cultural values, such as how people of a specific gender are perceived by society, they have yet not achieved enough impact to completely erase these expectations. The notion of one's own gender is created and regulated by their social treatment, through the process of validation that is based on social stereotypes. It is through these stereotypes that one has access and learns about the different cultural means of presenting the self, how to perform the self. According to the author, our daily lives invited us to consider our relationships with the other in a way that goes beyond presupposition but also constitutes (confirms, reformulates, questions) our ideas of Self and Other, based on our own actions. A universe that presents a value system relatively narrowed, limits the characters that need to either contain or abandon their own desires in order to be accepted. They are obliged to act according to the value

system in order, with no possibility of liberty to expand such a system. They must contain themselves, and belong, or be completely ostracized and abandoned.

The Kitchen: a place of change and discovery

If Maria eventually learns to dismantle her internal prejudices, it is due to her getting to know and getting closer to her roommates - and a large part of these bonding moments and breakthroughs happen not only in the apartment, but in the kitchen, the place in which they prepare and share their meals. In retrospect, the kitchen is, perhaps, the place of revelations in the novel, and Maria's relationship with the room back at her family's home holds a significant contrast with the kitchen in the flat in Dublin.

When Maria talks about the kitchen, and cooking in general back home, she talks about how she has absolutely no idea how to cook and how her mother has given up on it. Thinking back about the room itself, her thoughts drift to the memory of doing a favour to her mother, turning off the overhead kitchen lamp, as a way to close off the day - which leads to her almost associating the room with something negative. Maria thinks she feels constricted by standing under the kitchen lamp, but the feeling perpetrated is actually one of stagnation in general, a suffocation by her family home that stops her to grow, leading to a possible eternity of her eating the scraps from her mother's cooking. It comes in complete contrast with the feelings of freedom, intimacy and familiarity that are later on introduced in the kitchen in Dublin.

She had always disliked the moment when her mother would send her to turn on the overhead kitchen lamp and snuff out the day (...) it choked her to snap the light switch down and admit that the day was over, with no possibilities left but (...) cereal with hot milk for supper. (...) She used to fear she would always be four foot four as long as she stayed under the thrall of the kitchen light bulb, eating the spirals of sharp peel her mother tossed aside as she made apple pie. (82)

This particular reflection comes to Maria while she is helping Ruth with cooking - which is an aspect that holds relevance on its own, considering her previous explanation of lack of talent and patience to it. Her own mother does not teach her to cook and Maria also does not care for it, avoiding it even, but Ruth is patient and understanding enough to try to teach Maria how to properly sort and cut the ingredients, set the correct cooking time and how to properly cook it. Not only that, Ruth is also more alluring and convincing as Maria

does join her willingly and voluntarily in the kitchen, not only once but multiple times through the novel. During the brief moments in which Maria is back home visiting her family, we do not see her willingly cook once. In fact, besides the moment of eating or to gather her correspondence, Maria is barely in the kitchen at all, instead choosing to isolate herself back in her bedroom. If in Dublin the kitchen becomes a place of gathering and socialization that she welcomes and anticipates, back home the kitchen becomes smothering, with unwanted comments, annoying gossip or possible judgment.

In terms of edible contents, the food from back home also does not seem to excite Maria nearly as much as the food back in Dublin. She mentions bland foods, such as cereal for dinner or foods heavy with flour and heavy with sage - all made exclusively by her mother, who is constantly in and out of the kitchen.

The savour of something cooking drifted in from the kitchen: mince tarts? Cursing under her breath (...) After ten minutes Maria staggered up, stretched, and went into the kitchen for a mince tart.(194)

In this specific scene, Maria smells mince tarts being prepared and curses, making it clear that she is not particularly pleased with the prospect of eating it. Regardless, after a couple minutes, she relents and goes to eat one, as she is well aware that although it is not something delicious or that she desires to eat, it is what is available to her at her mother's house. The dish in itself also presents great distinction to the foods made back in Dublin, usually filled with colorful vegetables and sauces. It is a parallel that perfectly represents Maria's feelings regarding both of the rooms that serve the same purpose in different houses, but evoke completely different meanings and feelings for the character and her story.

In contrast to the kitchen back home, the one in Dublin is lively and warm. It is where Maria first meets Ruth and Jael and where she realizes Ruth and Jael are a couple by seeing them kiss. It is where Ruth teaches Maria how to cook, initiating the development of Maria's feelings for her, and where later on Ruth indirectly confesses her own interest in Maria, by admitting that she has been watching her.

“I used to be more like you when I was younger,” [Ruth] remarked.

Maria took a cautious bite of cucumber. “Like me how?”

“Oh, you know.” Ruth pressed a lid on a tub with the heel of her hand. “Good at saying no to things.”

“Am I?” She was not sure whether to take it as a compliment. “It’s mostly just cowardice.”

“No, *I’ve been watching.*” Ruth straightened her back and gave her a thoughtful look. “*You say no to most things, to make room for the things you really want.*”

She held a slice of cucumber up to the light bulb; it glowed white, like a cell under a microscope. *She fed it to Ruth.* “So what happened?”

“Came to college, got happy. Figured I was getting what I wanted, so it would be mean not to give other people what they wanted. Oh, I don’t know,” the voice straining to lighten, “I suppose I’m just overworked and overcommitted.” She bent to Maria’s hand, taking another sliver of cucumber into her mouth. (84)

The scene is a development of their previous interactions, in which Ruth has cooked for Maria and then, later on, has taught her to cook. In this instance, Maria not only joins Ruth in the cooking, actively wanting to be in the company of the other and help her, but also feeds Ruth small pieces of food, in an act of intimacy and care.

The kitchen is the soul of the apartment, the place where change happens, where matter becomes something else, different and improved and tastier. Going even further back, it is the place where all three main characters have their first dinner together and get to know each other. Although an introductory scene, where it was easy to see and explore Maria’s cultural background and how it had influenced her until that moment, it is also a scene that perhaps introduces Maria’s change.

On her way to dinner, Maria snacks on a bag of crisps - a childish, highly processed food made with not much care, almost an example of an anti-cooking food. Later, at the dinner table, Maria is confronted by Jael regarding her drinking choice, as she refuses the wine being served to her.

She wrenched the corkscrew from the wine bottle gripped between her knees and bent toward Maria.

Automatically Maria covered the glass. “None for me, thanks.” Jael trickled the wine through Maria’s fingers. Maria snatched her hand away. *Red drips scattered on the table*; one ran along a crack in the wood. “I said I—”

“I heard what you said.” The round-bellied glass was two thirds full. “But you can’t insult Ruth’s cooking by drinking water, especially not plague-ridden Dublin tap water.”

Maria *sucked* her fingers dry one by one as the conversation slid away from her. (12)

The wine dribbling through her fingers and staining the table, and later on being sucked from her fingers in an unintentional but sensual act, can be seen as an introduction to Maria’s change, a glimpse of her boundaries that will be pushed by her living and relationship with her roommates. Her act of covering the glass displays her initial resistance to change, but it is served regardless, and Maria has no option but to allow it to be served and taste it. It can almost be read as a metaphor for virginity, or even tied to a more sacred level, an almost religious experience, offering a facsimile of the Last Supper.¹¹ If in Dublin, Maria finds a new home, in the kitchen of that apartment she finds a new religion - leading to her rebirth, the rise of a new Maria.

Under heat: discovering desire

As it slowly becomes more and more obvious, Maria's external change in perspective of the Other, is a mere reflection of her internal realizations of her own Self.

Although there are multiple subtle indications through the novel, the most clear one comes in one specific scene in which Maria, after finding herself alone and unable to sleep, ventures into her roommate's bedroom. In an impulsive act, she opens their closet and looks through their clothes, running her fingers through them with her eyes closed, identifying who the clothes belong to by their shape and texture, and breathing in the smell of the clothes, until she enters the closet, sits down and locks the door behind her, immersing herself in the scent and soft touch of her roommates clothes.

Something infinitely soft touched her cheek. She twitched away in fright, then turned back to find it with her *lips*, but it was gone. Whatever was cutting into her foot mellowed to a gentle ache. Perhaps ten minutes passed in this way, with her breath getting deeper and the slow boom of her heart the only sound. Then Maria reached under her nightshirt and *touched herself* for

¹¹ This parallel was brilliantly pointed out by professor Alvany Guanaes in my masters qualification, and I thank her for offering this perception.

the first time since she could remember.

Eventually there was a small, familiar sound, like a bird pecking at a tree. The sound of a key in the front door. Maria lifted her head off her knees so fast that a heavy winter coat was pushed backward, and several hangers jangled in protest. She held her breath. The front door was shut, very gently. Footsteps at the top of the corridor. *Remember* 'O Most Gracious *Virgin Mary* that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored thy help or sought thy intercession'. (184)

Although there are no words being said or a big 'eureka' moment, this is the moment that first solidifies and confirms Maria's attraction to women. For the purposes of the narrative, it is not specified to whom the clothes that she is hanging on belong to, only a brief mention of the smell of lavender that is tied to Ruth. Maria then proceeds to masturbate for the first time, while inhaling their smell and holding their clothes. It is not only a sexual scene, but a sexual awakening, as it is implied that it is the first time she has ever done anything sexual at all.

It is also interesting to note that when Maria realizes that she is no longer alone in the apartment, her immediate instinct is to pray - an automatic religious act that lingers against the wave of changes in her life and mentality.

Until these last chapters, Maria seems to reproduce a line of thought that reinforces the concept of compulsory heterosexuality, which would be a direct result of her upbringing. This process is described perfectly by Spivak (2010), who, when analysing the formation of the subordinate subject and their possible voice, asks how could the subordinate subject manage their speech? How could they articulate power, desire and interest? The traditional normative culture in the context of Maria's upbringing reproduces epistemic violence that uses the tactic of neutralizing the Other, making it infeasible and expropriating it from any possibility of representation, and therefore silencing it. Consequently, Maria, being a product of this culture, reproduces the resulting structures of power and oppression. The Other is mute because the Other does not exist. Furthermore, as pointed out by Hall (2002)

Every regime of representation is a regime of Identity power formed, as Foucault reminds us, by the fatal couplet, 'power/knowledge'. But this kind of knowledge is internal, not external. It is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them

to that 'knowledge', not only as a matter of imposed will and domination, by the power of inner compulsion and subjective con-formation to the norm. (225-226)

The lack of lesbian representation not only denies and erases a group of women from history and human rights, leading them to either being invisible or seen only through the lens of stereotypes, but it also denies Maria knowledge of her own self. If the sense of estrangement is there from the beginning, the character feels dislocated, but never quite knowing why. By denying her representations of the previous existence of women that liked women, and how those women and relationships looked like, the character is denied a part of her own self that she only comes to know and elaborate in adulthood.

When we connect this sentiment of estrangement that is extremely present thought the novel, in her interactions to her family and even to Yvonne, to the contrasting feelings of comfort, intimacy and familiarity that Maria finds in her new apartment back in Dublin, we can connect once again to Tina O'Toole's essay, when the author quotes Anne Marie Fortier's description of "'home as not-home' in the narratives of lesbian/gay people", when explaining the concept of Queer people who experience 'estrangement in the original home', such as Maria, and whose process of moving away to an unfamiliar place becomes 'a movement away from being estranged' (136). In her work, O'Toole further develops her analysis by giving the example of the novel 'As music and Splendour' (1958) by Kate O'Brien. Clare, the main character, struggles to free herself from the Irish cultural expectations and standards, and when the character visits Ireland in her adulthood she realizes that she does not feel 'back home', as she does not belong there any more - as she has developed into a different woman after exploring and finding out more about her sexual identity. It is only by moving away from her 'home', and finding supportive queer kinship in a different country, that Clare finds freedom and herself. Furthermore, "Clare's migrant status enables the open expression of lesbian identity" (6), and staying back 'home' "would have meant suffering the kind of estrangement suggested by Fortier" (6). We can see this same process in Maria, in her awkward conversations and lack of connection regarding her own family, especially when dealing with their comments and expectations regarding marriage and her own future. She doesn't know herself before leaving home to move to Dublin, and she does not feel comfortable under the guides and beliefs that she has grown up with, back in her family's home.

All of this operates together to shape one's social practice, and are not always constantly related: the cultural emphasis of some goals varies independently of emphasis upon institutionalized means. There is a social structure that must be followed, and the proper adaptation to it works as a permit - if one achieves the aspirations determined by this structure, then they have a positive value or worth. This can be seen in Maria's thoughts on marriage and heterosexuality and her need to get in relationships with men regardless of her attraction to them, all due to her trying to manage her family's expectations and values. If unsuccessful, then she is to be set apart and excluded from her family, being treated as different and foreign, becoming the Other. Maria's family, of course, is not the only institution to establish such norms and social expectations, they are simply caught in the mentality cultivated by the context of smaller communities and their geographical location, such as rural Ireland, and reproducing what they have been taught to be the correct cultural expectation and perception of the Self and the Other.

The lack of collective memory/identity created by the erasure of Queer existence, more specifically Lesbian existence, aids to further develop the feeling of estrangement from 'Home' by simply denying their past existence completely. Donoghue touched on the subject herself, in an interview back in 2008.

"Imagine living in a city where there are no monuments, no buildings from before 1970, no proof that you had grandparents or parents, no history at all. Wouldn't that make you feel like you were just a passing fad, that you could be blown away like leaves? For any community to feel substantial and able to change without losing themselves, a history is absolutely crucial."

These conflicting sentiments of knowing that you do not quite fit in, without being able to look back into history and to locate your 'place' and others similar to you in society, is extremely present through Maria's journey, it is the very root of her internal conflict. The erasure of the Lesbian identity from Irish history due to both homophobia and misogyny leads to subjects whose Subjectivity and understanding of Self is not fixed and also not completely fragmented, but instead moving between identifications, places and categories - it illustrates subjectivity within the process of moving between and across the traditional boundaries that had been until then associated with categories such as gender, class or sexuality - for example, the disrupting of the traditional understandings of womanly identity

of the binaries of heterosexuality and homosexuality. The same traces of theory can be seen in the work of Spivak when the authors write about the subject as divided and displaced, whose parts are not always continuous or coherent with each other. Maria embodies these concepts through her growth and reformulation as a subject and identification, being profoundly affected by the surrounding influences, not only human but also physical, considering her move from rural Ireland to central Dublin.

Until the final moments of the novel, Maria cannot even imagine the possibility of being anything other than heterosexual, since her background does not allow her to see and understand the Other, much less to be the Other. Still citing Spivak, the author argues that the path of sexual difference is doubly obliterated, since the very ideological construction of gender maintains male domination, an easy statement to note in the book. The sexist culture is strongly reproduced in the book, although two of the main characters are feminist activists. Men tend to be the focus of Maria for a long time since she is constantly looking for some kind of attraction to them because she thinks this is the only option, the rule to be followed, the pattern to be reproduced. To recall what has been mentioned in previous chapters, without a form of agency, as a necessarily heterogeneous subject, the underling - and especially the underlying - cannot, in fact, speak. Especially because they are not heard, they cannot represent themselves. Maria is doubly subordinate due to her sexuality, although this second one is not recognized until the last moments. Due to her occupation of the space of a woman and to have her origin in a cultural context that does not allow the existence of lesbians, the character is doubly silenced in her society and not only cannot speak - she cannot even recognize her own need for speech.

In a second moment, one in which Jael once again pushes Maria's boundaries and her desires are brought to light, Maria finds herself voiceless. Jael kisses her, and Maria can not find in herself to say no (or yes, for that matter). She is silent and still as she is kissed, as she is discovered by Ruth, and she is still silent after Jael leaves.

Maria stood still. She craned her neck back to see the full bowl of luminous clouds, satellites and stars. Dizzy, she had the impression she might topple right off the building. Gradually she became aware of Jael standing just behind her, holding a strand of holly high in the air.

"What's that for?" she asked.

"No mistletoe," said Jael briefly, and bent round to *kiss her*. Later,

trying to remember whether it was a short or a long kiss, an acceptable peck or a dangerous fusion, Maria had *no idea*. It was somehow balanced on the knife edge between these definitions when Ruth's head came through the skylight. In the second her eyes took to get used to the dark, they had lurched apart.

"Oh, sorry," said Ruth. The blank oval of her face disappeared down the hole.

They were mute, staring at the skylight; then Jael made a dash for the ladder. Maria could hear heavy footsteps in the corridor, Jael's muffled voice protesting, petering out, then silence. (188)¹²

Maria's reaction to being kissed, even though there was no explicit consent, is interesting. Despite the circumstance, she does not reject the kiss. She thinks about it, and reflects on what it was or could be, before it got interrupted by Ruth, but at no moment she feels disgusted or even upset. There's no hatred in her thought process when it comes to it, only curiosity and desire. Later on, she is also plagued by guilt, however this feeling comes out mainly due to the cheating nature of the kiss, and not due to the gender of the person kissing her. Adding on to the previous scene, it's clear that although not openly saying it, Maria is slowly becoming aware and coming to terms with her non-heterosexuality.

"What I wanted to say," [Jael] murmured at last, "is that *I want you*."

A great weariness came over Maria. She longed to lie down on the couch and sleep for a hundred years. "I thought it might be that," she said. Then, the silence stiffening between them, she added, "Since when?"

"Since now." Jael's eyes were glowing in the firelight.

Maria avoided them. Stirring herself to anger, she went on. "Twenty hours is your idea of a decent interval, is it?"

"I have been waiting quite a while," she said in her most gentle tone.

"It wouldn't be worth the wait," Maria protested.

Instead of the expected denial, Jael said bluntly, "I don't care what it's like, I just want you." To make matters worse, she slid over beside Maria and

¹² *Stir-Fry* presents two openly bisexual characters - Jael and Damian, Maria's fling that is later on seen ditching Maria to kiss other men at the club. A second characteristic that both of these characters share is the fact that they are both cheaters. It can not be affirmed that the biphobia presented in the novel is intentional, but it is also undeniable that it does exist and could possibly cause negative effects in real life, as mentioned before.

put her arm *around* her. Maria was furious to find herself dissolving into tears like the worst of Hollywood heroines, but it was unstoppable. No one had ever put a hand on the back of her neck like that. Gulping, she *leaned* against Jael's warm frame. (227)

As the novel, and Maria's arc of self discovery, comes to an end, honesty and realization start to seep through the pages. Jael and Maria talk, after Ruth has left the apartment for over a week now, and Jael confesses her attraction to Maria, and approaches her, putting her arm around her. Maria initially cries, arguing with herself that it does feel good to be around Jael, because she has never felt wanted like that. It's not only a matter of if she feels attracted or not, but also a matter that it is the first time that she has felt as if someone truly wants her, which definitely has an influence on her reaction. After all, being wanted has a sensual appeal on its own.

However, Maria denies right after that she would ever be with Jael, and that her feelings for her are not enough. She tries to claim that she is not something, when Jael interrupts her. She calls out Maria on the deep changes that she has gone through, and accuses Maria of being afraid of admitting to herself that she loves women. Maria then gets frustrated and replies that she is not afraid of anything, and that she does not care if she is a lesbian or not. This is a huge change, and the opposite side of her initial reaction of disgust and almost fear when realizing she lived with lesbians. She goes from aversion to a group of people that she had been raised to classify as the Other with a negative connotation, to accept them as the Other with no other input than to ascertain them as different and belonging to another group, to approaching herself more and more, to finally not caring if she does belong to this social group. Lesbians are no longer seen as the Other after all, but the Self - Maria seeing herself as possibly part of the group, and not caring about it.

(...) The answer is still no. You should have realised that it couldn't happen," she hurried on, gaining conviction. "You know I'm not—"

Jael's voice was shaking with vehemence. "You don't know what you are."

"Don't patronise me." She shook her head free of Jael's hand.

"Maria, I've watched you for three months. You've changed under my eyes, you've come so far. You can't be too afraid to jump off the mountain."

"It's not fear, you stupid woman. I couldn't care less whether I turn out

to be a lesbian or whatever.” Maria blinked up at her in exasperation. “I just don’t want to go to bed with you. This isn’t the right mountain for me to jump off.”

Jael’s mouth twisted up at one corner. “I don’t believe you feel nothing for me.”

“I care about you. I don’t trust you as far as I could throw you. Which wouldn’t be far.”

“So you don’t actually want me at all?”

Jael’s lips were so close, the sound reverberated in her ear, and the scorch of breath made her shiver. “Yes, a bit.”

“Which bit?” Her lips met on Maria’s cheekbone, then landed lightly an inch below and slid downward. Tiny hairs came alive as they passed. The lips paused, just to the side of her mouth.

“All right, quite a lot, to be honest.” Maria’s mouth was itching to turn into the kiss. All at once she angled her head away, so the lips brushed her ear and were gone. “But not enough,” she told the hearth rug. Jael sat back and crossed her legs. Maria took this opportunity to fumble for a tissue and blow her nose. She hoped it would have the side effect of making her unkissable. (228)

After being pressed by Jael, Maria admits that she does feel sexual attraction to her, but that is all it is. She openly says that she does not want to be with her, not because she is not attracted to women (because she is now certain that she is), but because she is not in love with Jael. And although Maria might not be a fan of the conservative typical scene of marriage and children, she still cares about love and being in love. She does not deny loving women, she is simply not in love with Jael.

“Listen, what do you want to do?”

Her mind was blank. She scrambled for times, places, names. And then at once she knew exactly what to do. “I have to find Ruth.”

“To tell her all this? You should know, she won’t be coming back anyway.”

“No, not to tell her. Just to find her.”

Jael began speaking, then stopped herself, and realisation crept across

her face. "I see. God, I hadn't even thought of that."

"Of what?" And then Maria stopped, because she knew.

"That makes sense of a lot of things."

They looked at each other in bewilderment. "It does, doesn't it," said Maria, mostly to herself.

Jael cleared her throat. "How come I never saw?"

"I didn't either, till now." (230)

The closing scenes - after Jael's questioning on why she came back, and what does she want after all, Maria realises and openly states that she has come back for Ruth, that she wants Ruth, inferring that she is in love with her, ending once and for all the idea that she might be heterosexual or simply confused - she wants another woman, she loves another woman. With her words 'I didn't either, till now', Maria concludes the end of this process in change of identification of what is the Self and what is the other. She had become the foreigner, the different, the Other.

Little by little, the traditional values generated by her environment and culture in her upbringing, to which she clings while at the same time showing a deep will to withdraw from, are dissolved in the formation of a new Maria. This change is even verbally acknowledged by other characters - Jael states herself that she has seen Maria change "right in front of my eyes". To once again bring back Said's theory of how people exist in the space between the context in which they were raised, and the context in which they live, it is interesting to see how Maria struggles in balancing her two Self's (the one from Rural Ireland, and the one from Dublin), and how that contrasts with the space she had created as the Other until this point in her life. This 'new' space provides her a chance to not only question her constructions of Self and Other, but to see herself in the position of Other for the first time, by becoming aware and facing her own desire. The character, due to her human nature, is under constant change, as her identity is not a final product but rather the process of production itself - As put by Hall (1996), identity is a 'production' that is never complete, but instead always being processed, and constituted within representation and not outside it (54). Maria's identity, as detailed by the plot, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being' - her self discovery through exposure to the Other and questioning of her beliefs is as important as the feelings of sexual and romantic attraction to women that she had suppressed and ignored until then. If "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position

ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (Hall, 2002, 226), then it becomes even more evident how relevant her change in scenario and environment impact Maria’s self awareness and self identification.

Maria starts the novel with a world-view representative of higher social powers that dictated the knowledge she had accessed until then - which, when regarding minorities, was mostly reflected through stereotypes and a general negative lens. These dominant social structures, in the novel being represented by the church and the rural environment, have the power to make one see and experience themselves as 'Other' - leading Maria to have a feeling of estrangement and dislocation that only seems to be relieved in the very end of the novel, as she finally admits to herself, and to Jael, out loud, that she has feelings for another woman and that she does not care if that means she is a lesbian - she just wants to find Ruth. She is hungry for the woman she loves, and tired of denying herself from it - and who could blame her for that?

In the end, unforgiving Gods and restrictive rules of gender and sexuality stereotypes aside, humans are extremely simple.

We tamed fire because we wanted to be warm on the outside, and learned to dominate it into cooking because we wanted to be warm on the inside as well. We cook for the ones we love, because we want them to be healthy and well-fed, and we let them in return feed us too, with food and their words and their presence. In the words of the American poet Christopher Citro (2015): “I love you. I want us both to eat well”.

It makes sense, then, that the kitchen becomes the heart and soul of the house, the place in which love is created and developed. Maria herself states that “The flat smelt empty already, and Ruth was only gone a day.” (211). Although her comment is directly linked to the smell of Ruth’s cooking, it is also a representation of an olfactory memory of Maria’s feelings for Ruth, her love experience that has been created and developed in the kitchen. Food, and the shared act of cooking and eating, are then undeniably a love language - meals become then, not only a pleasant experience regarding nutrition, but a moment to feed the soul, encompassing the human experience and connection. In an interview in 2002, Chef and food critic Anthony Bourdain stated that “The perfect meal, or the best meals, occur in a context that frequently has very little to do with the food itself.”

Furthermore, in a different interview in 2010, Bourdain declared “Food is everything we are. It's an extension of nationalist feeling, ethnic feeling, your personal history, your province, your region, your tribe, your grandma. It's inseparable from those from the get-go.” This becomes especially relevant as Donoghue’s novel is built around the premise of a recipe, filled with symbolism regarding food and relevant small acts of cooking and feeding, both others and the self. In Dublin, Maria goes through a long process of self discovery, necessary for her to grow and become the final dish that titles the book - A stir-fry made of multiple ingredients that must be mixed together and put under heat - but she does not get to Dublin as an empty plate. She comes already filled with a long historical background granted to her through her family, religion and geographical placing.

The character brings her baggage with her and although such knowledge and beliefs will never truly be erased, as they are part of her history as well as her country’s history, by gaining new knowledge and being exposed to different perspectives she now has the tools to select which beliefs and actions she actually wants to apply in her life. By being exposed to the new, Maria unintentionally deconstructs the wall previously created between Self and Other, first by changing the extremely negative image of Others (more specifically non-heterosexual people) into a neutral image, by dismantling stereotypes, and then by changing her own positioning regarding the group of others, through indulging and exploring her own sapphic desires that had been suppressed until then. Due to the work of theorists such as Hall, we can see then that terms such as Identity, and the perception of Self and Other, are never truly fixed and under continual construction and influence of the environment surrounding the subject. Much like the act of cooking, of putting mixed ingredients under heat, Maria is under constant ‘becoming’, making a full transition and presenting an almost complete opposite perception of Self and Other that she had at the beginning of the novel.

CONCLUSION

Serving

The chapters of *Stir-Fry* are titled following the motif of acts realized during the process of cooking. I now relay and serve the conclusions of this research, much like the final chapter of the novel relays the conclusion to Maria's journey of self discovery and the character's breakthrough regarding her conflicts with internalized homophobia.

Taking the cooking theme and ideas permeated in the story into consideration, we can understand that Maria, and by extension all humans, have life recipes because they are made of ingredients, pre-defined by parental figures, religion and cultural and social background. How to prepare these ingredients, however, is a completely different topic, one that is chosen by the subject under change. Identity, much like cooking, is a process of constantly becoming and living in between the raw food that originates the recipe, and the final plate that is served on the table. In similar fashion, we can understand the final scene as Maria enacting a type of serving her own Self, with a new-found confidence in herSelf as a woman that loves other women, when she knocks on Ruth's door, ready to confess her feelings for her. Not only is the character no longer hiding her sexuality from others, but most importantly, she is no longer hiding it from herself. In a novel where we watch Maria learn how to cook and about herself, *Stir-fry* ends with the character chasing after Ruth, the person that sparks her process of self-awareness, leading to a pivot in her identification and positioning regarding the Other.

Through the analysis of the novel, it was possible to notice that the character's upbringing has a strong influence on her sense of self and how she perceives the other and especially how she deals with the difference and, more importantly, with those who she had classified as the Other until that very moment. By being forced to face these differences and question this Otherness, and the creation of it, Maria is lead to self reflection and the exploring of her feelings and boundaries helps her to perceive aspects of herself in a new light and to try and understand the parts of her character she had never had the possibility to acknowledge the existence of before.

Maria's recipe and the everlasting art of in between

On Maria's first interactions and internal reflections when facing the different aspects in the new city, it is possible to see not only the conservative values Maria has brought with herself from rural, conservative Ireland, to the modern city but also the vague idea she has of herself. She is unable to tell her future roommates her likes and dislikes, her hobbies or anything else about her own personality, as until then her life had been focused around her family, helping out at home and taking care of her brothers. While in one of the first excerpts she calls her roommates and the rest of Dubliners 'foreigners', establishing from the beginning the stark limits of Self and Other, Maria is also a stranger, even for herself, having a shallow knowledge of who she is. Following the same line of thinking regarding her origins and traditions, we can also see how the cultural values that were established during her childhood affect the way she perceives her own gender and what is expected of herself and other women. There are very specific roles and actions that one can and should take, and breaking these rules cause strong, negative reactions and social exclusion, as it has been established that social coercion and pressure play a big role in the establishment of one's participation in society. Even Maria herself, who does not manifest excitement per se at the idea of following the traditional expected role of wife and mother, is quick to judge and use negative words against another young woman that behaves in a way she deems to be morally wrong, claiming it makes her 'sick'. Although the character is unwilling to commit to the cultural expectations she has been taught to be the only correct way to live, this rejection seems to happen only on a superficial level. The shame and possibility of social rejection and exclusion are so ingrained that she also applies the same negative reaction and rejection to those who diverge from these conservative patterns, even though she herself feels restricted by them and does not completely agree or want to apply them in her life.

Regarding religion, we can see that although she maintains her positioning regarding her religious beliefs and habits of going to church, she does so with hesitancy. It marks a contrast with the dinner scene explored in the first chapter, where she affirms not being able to say what she likes or not to do, as everything she had ever done until then was strongly based on her family. This marks a point of contingency, in which the character's resolution falters and aspects of her own undiscovered personality seep through. She has not changed completely to the point of simply abandoning everything she had done until then, or strongly affirming to not believe in God, either as a concept of a religious figure, any more, but she

does seem less sure, more questioning of her likes and beliefs. A short number of months in the new city were not enough for her to abandon completely the faith and practices she had been carrying out her whole life, but were enough for her to see that maybe they are not absolute truths and that maybe, just maybe, they do not properly align with who she is or wants to be. The image she has built of herSelf until that very moment is not a true reflection of her identity, as one is much more fragmented than the solid, Christian, 'good' girl identity Maria had strived, deliberately or unconsciously, to represent to the ones around her, thus cementing a solidity to how she could understand herself. One's identity goes beyond one single image, and it can be much more than what her conservative upbringing had deemed it to be possible.

In these very first chapters of *Stir-Fry*, Maria gives the first steps to separate herself from the strict concept of identity and narrow understatement of Self she had construed until then, based on her very conservative upbringing, to see that maybe these beliefs are not so true and standard, and the world is not as concrete and black and white as she had believed until then. These first contacts and questionings of the self, are the firsts to a long list of realizations until her final discovery of the most diverse aspects of herself that she had until then suppressed and categorized as to exclusively belong to what she called the 'Other'. Throughout the rest of the book, by facing the difference so much closer, daily and inside her own home, Maria slowly learns that one's identity is more than the eye can see and that her own identity is composed by more parts and fragments that she had noticed before. She is composed of the values and morals she was taught during her upbringing, and cannot separate herself from them completely, even if she does not believe them to be true any more. Slowly, the group she thought to belong exclusively does not fit her any more, and thus she starts to identify herself more and more with those she had considered being so different, and so the place of the Self and the place she had previously categorized as the Other, intersect in some aspects and become not so different from each other. The Other is part of the Self and vice versa, and they complement and carry each other throughout life even if there is a social tendency to establish them as total opposites with no similarities or contact. Regardless of these popular beliefs, our identities are formed by different aspects and fragments of our experiences and encounters throughout life. And so, like Maria, we too grow learning to cultivate an understanding of both our taboos and customs, as well as what lies beyond our own world view.

You can not serve if you do not have a recipe

Looking back at the lack of history and representation that perpetuates in the cultural background analysed, it seems easy to identify that Maria's naive perception and partial blindness regarding the existence of lesbians and of her own sexuality are the clear results of a long line of Queer erasure and ignorance. This social intentional ignorance and lack of awareness are part of a larger scheme created by the oppressive and conservative culture of Ireland, due to its history and strong ties with the Catholic Church. Even taking into consideration the specific timeline in which the novel was written and that the story is placed in, the marginalization created by the intended erasure of Queer women is baffling. The 90s are a focal point of Irish history in terms of social movements for equal rights, filled with relevant dates to different causes such as women's independence and many others. However, to once again mention and exemplify the large extent to which female queerness was erased, Ireland only legalized male homosexuality in 1993 - Female homosexuality, however, was declared "always legal" by the UNO declaration of 2008¹³, as it had never been even considered by the legal system as something existent enough to be mentioned, and even less regularized by law. Women, and especially queer women, remain as an afterthought of society.

As previously established, despite Ireland's relative lack of diversity, the story does take place in an urban centre offering Maria access to a larger pool of a variety of identities, that were either not present or had been forcefully silenced through her life until then. The change of location is the starting step towards her shift in mindset and self identification, not only because it is a step away from the barriers that had been socially imposed until then making her blind to the Other, but because it opens a window that allows her to actually see the Other for the first time. The key to Maria's change in perception, and as a consequence in her change in identification, is not only a matter of outgrowing conservative beliefs by moving to a less conservative environment, but a matter of actually meeting a part of society that she would not have had the opportunity to actually get to know back home. What had been treated until then as rumours, jokes or mortal sinners, become human to her eyes, as she slowly learns to accept them for who they are without letting these pre-set judgments stop her from doing so. She eventually moves beyond that, to actually start liking them and

¹³ Information available at "State Sponsored Homophobia 2016: A world survey of sexual orientation laws: criminalisation, protection and recognition" by the *International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association*.

developing her own feelings and, therefore, question her own identity - Which, once again, would most likely have never had happened if she had never left the rural area and moved away from her family or any of her school friends. By being away from the subjects that had been working as regulators of social expectations in her life, Maria is able to finally question and develop awareness, to the Other and the Self. As a consequence, she becomes conscious of her own Otherness that she had been suppressing until that very moment. In less than a year of co-living with people who had been until then either erased or demonized, the walls in between both concepts become blurred. While in the first chapter of the novel, while reflecting in all the wives and mothers she knew back home, Maria worries about who she will turn out to be, this realization offers for an interesting twisted version of the same question: Who Maria could have been, had she had access to Queer history and representation of living Queer women before her. Would she have been able to identify her own desires earlier on? Would she have realized her feelings for other women before Ruth, such as Nuala? Would she have different ideas of her own gender presentation? Would the perpetual sentiment of estrangement from her family and friends still be present, or would she be less aware of them if she knew the root? We can only wonder and assume.

It becomes clear, then, that the matter is not so much the place and time, although those were clearly aspects that have an extremely high impact on identity formation. The root of the problem is the overall system that either socially exiles or historically erases those deemed different. By doing so, not only an entire group of human beings are cruelly forgotten and, in a way, denied their humanity by being deemed irrelevant or abominable, but the future generations of these same groups get left completely in the dark. By being denied the past, and therefore recognizing themselves in the other, Queer youth becomes alienated of society and their own identities, being then unable to see a future in which they feel like they belong.

More importantly, it is only through having access and direct contact with subjects that have been classified as the Other that one can dismantle the prejudiced views that have been established by the cultural environment that they have been raised on. Much like Maria, only starts to change her perspective and, in a slow and tentative process, let go of the homophobic stereotypes and internalized misogyny she had carried until that moment after interacting on a daily basis with her roommates. Although during the first weeks the character is unaware of the nature of their relationship, it is only by meeting them under the assumption that they are heterosexual that it is possible for her to establish this contact without

automatically enabling a negative and judgmental perception of who they are, who they should be and how 'valid' or 'acceptable' is their relationship. Due to this previous familiarity that sets the base of their friendship, when Maria finds that Ruth and Jael are a couple, despite the shock and the initial angry reaction, she already sees them as humans - and as consequence, as people that she cares for beyond and regardless of their sexuality. The wall that had been created in between her and this created space of Otherness gets broken before she is even aware that it exists. More importantly, after consideration, Maria concludes that she does not care about their sexuality enough to move away, and that she likes them enough as people more than she cares about the traditional view that she had been raised under, and more than she cares about what other people might think. The wall has been broken and the space in between Self and Other is still present, but is neutralized instead of seeing as negative.

After this initial change in perspective, and as Maria grows closer and closer to both Jael and Ruth, the space slowly starts to close, the conceptions of Self and Other intertwining. It accidentally presents an odd parallel to the American classic *Huckleberry Finn* - when the character who had been raised in an extremely racist environment, and spoke with a heavily racist language, by meeting and befriending runaway enslaved Jim, abandons all his beliefs and the community he had until then. When warned about the consequences of his friendship, Huckleberry boldly declares "All right then, I'll go to hell" (Twain, 1884, 120). It is the similar feeling that Maria evokes in her discussions with Yvonne, and, when annoyed with Jael condescending comments regarding her confusion, she declares "I could not care less if I turn out to be a lesbian" (228). The space in between Self and Other exists not because of an abhorrent difference and ethical and moral dilemma - it is not natural, but human creation made out of prejudice and hatred. By creating this connection of first fondness, and then love and desire, it becomes easy for the characters to dismiss the legacy of queerphobic language and conceptions that had been so strongly present in her beliefs for her entire life.

When matters of desire, and self-knowledge, start getting more further explored by the character and Maria starts to more intensely question herself the inquiry that has been presented to her since the beginning of the novel - what does she like, what does she want, who is she - the space between Self and Other closes. The character understands a bit more what she wants, and sees that while she had been searching for possible boyfriends and things of like, she had been doing so by using the wrong pan. The problem had not been the specific

men she had been trying to date, but the fact that they were men in general. In truth, Maria's naivety might have been non-existent, and she would have had the answers to at least one of those questions much earlier on, if she had not been denied access to actual Lesbian existence her entire life. It not only rendered impossible for her to know the Other, to imagine their existence, but it made it impossible for the character to know herself and who she is. When she has access to it, by meeting Jael and more specifically Ruth, with whom she shares values and traits in similarity, Maria goes through the entire process of accepting Lesbian existence, humanization and, finally, self-identification through the other.

Through the tentative steps of following a recipe she does not quite know yet, with pre-disposed ingredients that are not all useful or fresh for consumption, Maria finds the final dish of her own desires and is able to serve it not only to Jael and Ruth, but to the most important person: herself. By changing and defying the pre-set measurements and standards, and experimenting with new seasonings and techniques, the character is able to address questions that she had been asking herself for so long and find the answers - The Self in the Other, the Other in the Self.

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