How to Disguise Fairy Tales in 21ˢᵗ Century Ireland.
A Feminist Analysis of Marian Keyes' and Cathy Kelly's Blockbusters

By Maria Amor Barros del Río
Universidad Europea Miguel de Cervantes, Valladolid

Abstract: Ireland has suffered many extraordinary changes during the last decades that have made the Emerald Isle a geographical point upon which all eyes are fixed. Despite this metamorphosis, the question is if its population and cultural heritage have been able to cope with the times. Known as a traditionally catholic and conservative country, many social aspects remain unchangeable and those that have evolved may still keep an inner glimpse of the old times that is not always easily recognizable.

Undoubtedly, women and all subjects related to them have experienced a revolution. However, data show that true equality is still far from being reached. In this context, literature must be taken as a powerful cultural force that helps create stereotypes and a popular conscience. Thus, this article analyses the success of what has been called "women's literature", especially Marian Keyes' and Cathy Kelly's bestselling books. It also tries to examine to what extent the traditional ideologies of womanhood are present and by which means their female protagonists attach to the old stereotypes under a mask of modernity and economic boom. Finally, their effects on the female Irish population will also be studied in order to demonstrate that globalization and modern capitalism prove to be unable to change the old myths that lie beneath and keep women in a relegated position.

Key Words: Romantic novel, Irish women writers, 21ˢᵗ century Ireland, Marian Keyes, Cathy Kelly

It is amazing to see how Ireland has changed in the last decades in terms of economy and modernization. A land that had been a colony for centuries, holding one of the highest rates of emigration and unemployment, a land that only achieved its independence in 1921, has now become a country of immigrants and economic growth. Such changes bring with them many novelties in terms of culture, society and customs. In the light of this globalising phenomenon, this article will focus on the role of women in the Republic of Ireland and their representation in the media, especially Cathy Kelly's bestselling novels. Finally, the intended new model of the "modern" Irish woman that these works project will be challenged to conclude that old values and static parameters still rule women's images in 21ˢᵗ century Ireland.

To understand the current state of matters in Ireland, it is necessary to have a brief look at its history and follow its evolution up to now. Centuries of oppression and resistance, the pride of a Celtic inheritance mingled with Christian beliefs and the desire to stand as a distinctive entity against the British conquerors had lead, at the turn of the 20ᵗʰ century, to a rabid nationalism that concluded with the acknowledgement of Ireland as a country in its own right. So, one casts one's eyes back to the

middle years of the previous century and remembers a country marked by "economic policies of self-sufficiency, protectionism, home market orientation, in short economic nationalism"(Redlich 1978: 84). Such an atmosphere would not encourage the promotion of individuals, not to mention women. On the contrary, it would rather enforce the traditional family unit and roles that both the 1937 Constitution and the Catholic Church underlined. Many scholars have studied this period of time[1] only to conclude that since the 1920s the official discourses had placed Irish women in the home, their main roles being those of care-takers and moral "pillars of the house" (Kelly 1988). In this period of time, the symbolic realm trapped Irish women between the Celtic vestiges of Ireland as a woman to be saved, Erin/Cathleen Ni Houlihan, and the new concept of nation, "Mother Ireland",[2] the land of all Irishmen for whom so much blood had been shed but whose role was absolutely passive. Ideologically, Irish women impersonated the land. Ironically enough, in real life they were not allowed to possess it (O'Brien 1983: 28). This situation was also perpetuated by the existence of complementary laws whose aims were to keep the population, but especially women, uninformed and at home, and thus, with no choice: during De Valera's regime, married women were not allowed to sign any type of contracts; in 1923, the Censorship of Films Act was passed and in 1929, the Censorship of Publications Act came to light; in the 1930s the government offered incentives to the industries that employed men over women; in 1935, the importation and commercialisation of contraceptive devices were prohibited. Moreover, the State also used the media as a means to create a popular ideology and *The Irish Press* became its most powerful tool.

On the other hand, the Church, allied with the State, also used the pulpit to teach moral values that were addressed very frequently to the female audience, and so, while "modern, fashionable young women were castigated from the altar, the self-sacrificing Irish Mother was elevated to national symbol"(Ryan 1998: 263).

Because both law and faith supported this ideology that made women into second-class citizens, the established order seemed to be the correct one. Social approval was the reward to those who followed the norms whereas those who could not or would not fit in with the model were considered social outcasts: single mothers,[3] prostitutes, married women without children[4] and spinsters[5]. Among many others, one effect of this complex attitude towards the body, sexuality and self-identification was an extremely high rate of mental illnesses and schizophrenia among the Irish population at the time (Herr 1997: 32).

Despite it all, it should be briefly noted that there were also acts and forms of resistance and many voices rose in order to condemn a situation that lasted until the 1960s. The Irish Countrywomen's Association[6] and The Irish Housewives' Association,[7] were two examples of organised women profiting from the techniques they had learnt in the previous nationalistic movements (Coulter 1994).

Following the flow of time, from the 1960s on, Ireland's laws began to change and the country opened its frontiers to the rest of the world. In 1967, secondary education became free for all; radio and television played an important role in opening the country's mind to new advances and ideas; the First Commission on the Status of Women, unveiled in 1972 the discriminatory situation of women and their most urgent needs. Ireland's entrance into the EU in 1973 also led to important changes, such as the Equal Pay Directive of 1975,[8] and it hastened the creation of a fairer and more egalitarian legislation.[9]

What is more, some critics consider that Ireland's current economic boom had its origins in the mid-1980s when there was a drop in emigration rates, population growth, easier access to education and a slow but sustained increase of a non-agricultural workforce. Evelyn Mahon therefore affirms that "between 1975 and 1991 the number of economically active women increased by 36%"; however, in 1988, the unemployment rate was still 16.7% for men compared to 19.8% for women (1995: 703). Certainly, the economic boom has had its effects on the island's population. Irish people have experienced dramatic changes, especially in relation to the labour market. In 2003, unemployment rates in Ireland were 4.7% for men and 3.9% for women whereas the European Union was left far behind, showing higher figures (8.8% and 9.9% respectively). In particular, the island "had the fifth lowest male unemployment rate and the second lowest

female unemployment rate of all the EU 25 countries in 2003"(CSO 2004). Despite these data, and the fact that just over 40% graduates in Ireland in 2004 were men, the average risk of falling into poverty was still higher for women and Ireland had the second highest proportion of women convicted of a criminal offence.[10]

Despite these economic and social changes, in practice there are many restrictions preventing women from achieving a truly equal status and, what is more, there is a breach between different considerations of women. Undoubtedly, the phantoms of the 1937 Constitution and De Valera's times still exert a powerful influence on the Irish reality.[11] Nowadays, ideologies of "womanhood" and "motherhood" continue to play a key role in the Irish psyche to validate the traditional family unit as the correct one, to the detriment of women as citizens. The data speak for themselves: in 2004, 47% of Irish women were in the labour force compared to 70% of men, the main task of 34% of the rest of the women was "looking after the home or the family", a status that applied to less than 1% of men (CSO 2004). Logically, different voices claim that Irish laws perpetuate the presence of married women in the family home, making them financially dependent. According to Coakley, mothers and lone parents who work full time are treated differently in relation to training and welfare to mothers who are in the home full-time, so, as she affirms, "in Ireland the dual role of women as mothers and carers is not acknowledged. One can either take one role or the other"(1997: 192). Going even further, Clare O'Hagan affirms that welfare benefits to married women hold a pro-natal policy whereas a pro-employment policy is exerted upon lone parents. In her opinion, the media, the welfare system and state agencies clearly favour married mothers over unmarried mothers and legal and cultural legitimacy is difficult to achieve for lone mothers (2005). Studying it from social and moral considerations, it was only in 1994 that separation of married couples could take place and the 1995 referendum passed the right to divorce in Ireland. As can be deducted from all these arguments, in Ireland there is still a disguised patriarchal organization of society promoted by some institutions. However, daily life seems to threaten these pillars in many

ways. In particular, the traditional family unit, which supports patriarchal systems, is obviously challenged by the data: women's average age at birth of first child keeps on increasing, reaching the age of 27.8 in 2002 (CSO 2004); in 1995, 20% of all births were outside of marriage (Gray & Ryan 1997: 525), but in 2004, the percentage had risen to more than 30% (O'Hagan 2005).

Maybe to avoid things getting out of control, many tools are used as a counterweight to try and keep everything in the correct order. For instance, nowadays, the media are considered a pillar of modern culture. They disseminate news from all over the world and notions of fashion, they clearly model values and ideologies and their influence is immeasurable. Literature in particular was once a privilege for some; now it has become a business that makes millions every year. There are all kinds of literature and there is certainly a kind of literature addressed to women in which female characters' daily lives and feelings are discussed. Such a way of writing has not appeared out of the blue but derives from a literary tradition originating in the 18th and 19th centuries. In those times, "authors went to a good deal of trouble and even some awkwardness to see to it that *Bildung* and *romance* could not coexist and be integrated for the heroine at the resolution"(Du Plessis 1985: 3). That is why, in the scholar's opinion, the female author's challenge for the 20th century and beyond is reconciliation of love and independence, and the writing of endings that might offer a wider range of possibilities apart from marriage or death. At present, in a social and political context where there is apparently free access to the education and labour market, where there are social allowances for all and where there is a welfare state, the task is to determine to what extent Du Plessis's forecast has been achieved and how its outcome may influence social values and women's perception of themselves. For this purpose, it should not be forgotten that the conditions that regulate the development of any novel, its ending and the depiction of its characters are always determined by social, economic and cultural values and that every literary meaning may vary according to its verbal structure and a socially situated reader (Radaway 1983: 55).

Among the wide range of Irish women writers who deal with female intimate feelings

and experiences, Cathy Kelly and Marian Keyes stand as two of the most successful contemporary writers whose novels are sold all over the world. Their intimate way of writing fits into the category of romance —a sub genre of the novel form, as categorized by Rachel Blau Du Plessis (1985)— whose usual protagonists are normal women who negotiate their feelings, family and love in the times they live. Their works may not fully coincide with traditional or standard conceptions of romance so the task here is to clarify to what extent Keyes and Kelly's writings can be called romantic novels and where their success lies. For these purposes, a selection of the authors' novels has been made attending to criteria of publication date and representativeness of each author's style: Kelly's *Woman to Woman* (1997), *Someone Like You* (2000) and *Just Between Us* (2002) will be analysed as well as Keyes' *Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married* (1997) and *Sushi for Beginners* (2000).[12]

To start with, a paradigm of what romance is should be stated before considering the chosen novels. British critic Nicci Gerrard's parameters regarding these "romantic blockbusters"[13] will give a basic notion of their main elements:

> There is a hero (rich, grim, powerful and with concealed wells of tenderness beneath his manly chest); a heroine (beautiful, often poor-becoming-rich, often an orphan or without family support); a huge amount of consumerism – clothes, objects and possessions are described in intricate detail; a fair sprinkling of misunderstanding and jealousy and melodrama (1989: 131).

Going further and according to Sánchez-Palencia's definition of popular women's romances, in these novels love is presented as a pivotal aspect to the plot; there is an abundance of specific details; ordinary and unexpected events are mingled; all characters follow a rigid behavior code; emotions play a key role and individual happiness meets social interests in happy endings (1997: 52). Typically, these novels keep their female characters in a domestic realm and men are presented from a distance as a goal to achieve, as an objective to conquer.

As will be seen, not all these characteristics fully apply to the novels under study. However, there is a significant similarity between Sánchez-Palencia's definition and both authors' novels. Now, the purpose is to demonstrate that they can be categorized as women's romances despite the differences they may show with regard to the traditional concept. An analysis of women's representations will shed light on the type of woman these novels depict. It will be followed by an investigation of the gender relations that female and male characters have in order to analyze the social order that these novels sustain.

To begin with, a deep preoccupation with aspect, bodies and looks is characteristic of all Keyes' and Kelly's novels. It seems extremely important not only to be beautiful, but also to surround oneself with beautiful things, accessories and people. In both authors' initial chapters, even the plainest woman is given some praise that makes it easy for the reader to identify with any of them. Astonishing, beautiful eyes, a wonderful mane of hair, an incredibly sexy body or a witty character are recurrent elements that the author displays at ease in order to create in the readers the illusion of feeling special through their identification with any or several of the characters. That is why these novels normally display a range between two and four female protagonists whose ages may vary between their twenties and their fifties and whose problems are normally focused on their relations with the opposite sex.[14] Whether they have a partner or not is a fact that varies and allows all kinds of readers to identify more easily with one or more of them. They are usually working women, except in the few cases when they are housewives, but their social lives tend to be quite active. Money is never a problem and, what is more, they generally have enough to spend on expensive clothes and beauty treatments. It could be said that they belong to an upper-middle class of self-made urban women. Their family ties usually play a secondary role (except in the case of *Just Between Us*) and their strength resides in the friendship they share with each other. Sometimes their humble and difficult country origins are left aside very successfully and their busy urban lives are their present and their future.[15] In general, all these novels fit in the women's romance type of writing as they all focus on a brief period of time in the lives of these women and their search for an ideal partner.[16] Both Keyes' tendency to write in a first person narrator and Kelly's recurrent third

person narrator achieve a high degree of intimacy with the reader due to the personal subjects they display.

When the novels refer to male characters, these fit perfectly in the prototype of a romantic hero. Attractive mature men are often described in the following terms: "Some women loved that sort of big, solid bloke with the rumpled face and the crinkled up eyes. And he had a commanding presence. [...] David was the sort of man who made everyone from waiters to managing directors dance attendance on him"(SLY 419). Other descriptions vary from "[...] clever, witty, good-looking in a boyish way, a talented photographer and an inveterate charmer of women"(WtW 31), to "[...] his skin was a honey shade, his hair the colour of corn, a mane of silky strands that fell over his dazzling brown eyes and that face... Handsome wasn't the word. Wide jaw, long aristocratic nose and cheekbones you could hang your hat on"(SLY 170), and "[...] he was tall, which she liked, and she liked the way his hair was carelessly swept back from his high forehead [...]. He wore nice clothes, slightly casual but expensive. And he looked clever, too. Shrewd intelligence burned behind those eyes"(JBU 130). As a norm, they are successful and worthy: "Everything about Mark screamed money, power and taste"(WtW 208).

Despite their middle age, surprisingly enough these male characters never suffer from overweight problems. Eating disorders are something alien to their world and their well sculptured bodies hardly ever need exhausting gym sessions. Greying temples are welcomed as a sign of maturity and stability. However, they also represent an ideal superior partner who is able to lead the woman's life under his protection. In general, male partners are highly praised and they are depicted as valuable prey for which every woman would die. We could say that in this kind of novels men constitute the ultimate prize, the highest goal for any woman to achieve. An important reason could be that they hold the very same attributes that these women long for: beauty, power and status, and the narratives suggest that by conquering them, they also incorporate those characteristics that would transform them into the ideal woman who perfectly matches a socially accepted code of success. By longing for this status, these female characters embody representations of dependant and romantic

women, despite their masks of busy-like and self-made modern girls. All these arguments lead to Anne Crany-Francis' conclusions:

> Romances describe how masculinity and femininity are constructed in a bourgeois, patriarchal society, and they situate readers to accept, to naturalize, this definition of gender roles as the price of material success: so it becomes "natural" that a powerful, attractive, successful, wealthy, older man will fall in love with a powerless, but beautiful, poor, younger woman (1990: 203-4).

So, in all these novels, single female characters inevitably undertake a search for Prince Charming that would secure them self-esteem, economic security and, most important of all, social acceptance, as Holly acknowledges in *Just Between Us*: "Having a man was a status symbol to beat all others. Without one, Holly was a low caste"(73). This sort of affirmation within a novel published in 2003 demonstrates the pressure society and institutions keep on exerting on single women nowadays. This patriarchal organization of society shows a veiled rejection towards single women and single mothers as studied before, and the novels under study reflect this ideology perfectly well. In *Someone Like You*, Leonie, a divorced mature woman and mother of three children, also complains that her old married friends never stop trying to match her with blind dates. Nevertheless, absolutely all female characters in these novels end up finding an ideal partner, so the family structure is secured and identified as the correct happy ending. These literary models serve to marginalize single mothers and single women, equating once again both concepts and perpetuating femininity as an "institutionalized sign" that is partially represented (Skeggs 1997: 116).

As if wanting to trivialize love relationships, these women's commentaries would frequently remind the reader of teenagers who giggle over the men they know or they wish they knew. A very good example of this is the way Leonie describes her ideal partner: "he has to be tall and strong [...] He's got to be over forty and I think I fancy dark men, definitely, but he can have greying temples. That's very sexy, distinguished [...] he has to be filthy rich and love children, animals and women who never stick to their diet"(SLY 117). It all serves to confirm fact that these fictional women's confidence is

always related to aspect and men. Very often, the reader finds them dressing up for their men and when they feel lonely, their self confidence seems to evaporate. For instance, at the beginning of *Woman to Woman*, Aisling wonders why she should try to look nice once her husband has left her for another woman (24). The body becomes a constant menace to their psychological balance: weight, age and fashion play a dangerous role that alters every woman's self confidence. So, a good combination of the three of them becomes a symbol of high status and admiration. However, when there is lack of one or more of them, the female protagonists seem to lose their personal values: "In cohabiting bliss, her ambition had disappeared along with her waistline. Until that awful August day she'd thrown him out and had started reclaiming her life –and her figure"(SLY 10). Even simple actions like eating or undressing are seen as forbidden elements in the romantic game. While Leonie affirms: "I'd put any man off me if he saw me eating […] women with big appetites put men off, I'm sure of it"(SLY 67), Aisling moans that "No amount of lycra underwear could conceal her spare tyre and cellulite-covered bum. Why waste money looking for sexy lingerie?"(WtW 4). Undoubtedly, insecurity and dependence are recurrent female feelings displayed by these novels. What is more, Keyes imprints a funny approach to such a complex and serious matter in the character of Lucy, who tries many different sorts of diets that have no sense just to see that she is unable to lose any weight at all (LSGM 47-48). Depression, weight and guilt are companions in these "modern" women's lives. They represent the dark side of an oppressive society that dictates female appearance and looks despite its absurdity and women are forced to bear it all. Without a light approach, these novels would turn into tragedies.

As already mentioned, fashion also plays an important role in representations of women's success and good taste. Very often, the protagonists work in show business or fashion magazines and take part in social and glamorous events. Also, what they wear and the products they use become unspoken signs of who they are and how much power they are able to display. Specific and expensive labels, brands and shops are mentioned in several books to illustrate the models to be followed in the protagonists' society and, by extension, they influence the readers' likes and desires. Far from liberating feminine representations from current fashion constraints, this attitude diminishes female characters and reduces them to material possessions and customs. Finally, readers are induced to believe in them as complements to their personalities and symbols of good taste and success.

With almost half the female Irish population in the work force, these novels imprint an atmosphere of modernity describing their protagonists as career women at work. Generally, these women's jobs are exposed as a symbol of high status despite the inconveniences it might cause, as Jo admits: "trying to be the nineties career woman had meant keeping up the façade of a perfect life, complete with a handsome lover, total independence and a job most women would kill for" (WtW 39). Unbelievably, they are always successful women at work and if not, they seem to enjoy it very much. However, a critical reader would also put objections to this idealized image of modern Irish women when comparing these literary illusions to the figures that show that only 14.7% of all Irish working women work for "financial and other business services", education and health being the economic sector with the highest female representation (almost 30%)(CSO 2004). Once again the literary representations of working women clearly disrupt reality inducing to false expectations.

Something similar could be said of married women who stay at home. In spite of them being more than 34% of the whole female Irish population,[17] Kelly's novels rarely pay attention to them and when they appear, they tend to be high class women who also fill their days in socializing. A good example of it is Rose Miller's perfect family and ordinary life. When she is asked what she is to do on a certain day, she answers: "The usual. Trip to the supermarket this morning, a charity meeting in the afternoon and the poverty action gala tonight"(JBU 17).

But the fairy-tale story becomes too unreal when single mothers, a recurrent topic in these novels, are depicted as very successful businesswomen who lack a male partner or are suddenly abandoned by him but whose personal values and beauty always lead them to a reliable man's arms in the end. Data and

real life mock such childish improbabilities as we see that the number of lone parents who live in poverty has risen 50% in the last 10 years (Combat Poverty Agency 2004).

All these women's social positions are definitely determined by those of their husbands or male partners and their personal skills are put into practice mostly in social events as "partners of…", never daring to go into the political or economic arenas by themselves. Once more, social and financial dependence is a key issue when divorce menaces these ideal matches and it all serves to confirm that the romance plot still "values sexual asymmetry […] and evokes an aura around the couple itself" (Blau Du Plessis 1985: 5).

One novelty with regards to traditional romantic novels seems to be the open address to sexuality in which female characters tend to play an active role. Far from the submissive and expectant sex partner model, Kelly's protagonists seem to enjoy a varied and active sexual life that might not match completely with reality, given the taboos related to their bodies. Taking into account that Irish tradition, morality and religion have kept sexual matters behind the scenes for a very long time and that it was only in 1995 that there was free access to information on abortion, for example, a critical reader would wonder whether these protagonists have had a very liberal upbringing (which is still improbable in recent Irish history)[18] or if this is another device used to liberate the readers' imagination and fantasies into a world with no moral constraints. Whatever it may be, it must be noted that most sexual intercourse provides the protagonists with unearthly and almost unreal pleasures which are hard to believe: "And when they finally came together in a surge of passion, the intensity of her orgasm made Jo shudder, and wonder how she'd ever thought she'd enjoyed lovemaking with anyone else" (WtW 34).

Furthermore, detailed descriptions of sexual scenes openly address the female orgasm as an unmistakable way of measuring satisfaction in sexual relationships "[…] until she exploded in a firecracker of orgasm that was savage, primitive and utterly blissful" (SLY 203). Apart from denaturalising sexual intercourse, these paragraphs contribute to the reduction of relationships to successful physical encounters that should leave these fictional characters completely satisfied, a cold

approach to emotional engagement that has also been considered a key element in South American situation comedies on television (Roura 1993).

In some cases, sexuality also acts as a means of improving the woman's self-esteem. That is evident in the case of Holly, the youngest of the Miller sisters whose shame of her own body suddenly fades when making love: "In her whole life, Holly had never felt more desirable or more desired. […] Holly felt beautiful. And tiny. Next to Tom's strong, muscular body, she was slender and delicate as a reed" (JBU 587). A similar scene can be found in *Watermelon*, where Claire expresses: "[…] But he was so big and manly. He made me feel like such a fragile little woman" (WM 238). Once more, psychological dependence of a male partner is obvious in Holly's case, he being the model with which to compare a standard concept of "femininity". In general, deep feelings and interpersonal complexities are left aside, the politics of perfect bodies, appearances and material needs being the code that rules the stories.

Another aspect that really strikes a critical reader is the almost absolute absence of references to religion and family bonds in these Irish novels. Due to history and tradition, these two aspects are still relevant matters in Irish society and despite the economic boom in the country, its population is still marked by them. However, in Kelly's novels there is hardly any commentary towards religion, which is something very unnatural for a country with deep and controversial catholic roots. In 2002, more than 90% of the Irish population declared themselves to be Roman Catholic (CSO 2004) and even though many young people do not practice it anymore, education and upbringing are still marked by religious values. Something similar can be seen in relation to family bonds. Except in the case of *Just Between Us*, our heroines are quite detached from their family roots. Rare visits are paid to the home in the country, more as an act that must be done rather than as an occasion of joy and encounter. Far from being just casualties in Kelly's works, one would tend to think that there is a deliberate omission of these very Irish topics in order to give the stories a much more international atmosphere. The protagonists could represent any woman living in any developed country. On purpose or not, their "Irishness" is faded by a more

universal matter, love, and so these best sellers wisely address a wider female audience. Their international success confirms that.

To conclude, all the novels under study show the same paradigm: profuse details and intense feelings accompany the quest for love that runs these women's lives. Through it, their negotiation with society and relationships makes them overcome difficulties and problems because they know that the ultimate prize will reward them with social acceptance, a certain status and, therefore, self-confidence. Although the focus of these novels is directed to their female protagonists Anne Cranny-Francis wisely affirms that they represent "the patriarchal (white supremacist) bourgeois individualist myth par excellence: the myth that any goose-girl can marry a king (if she is sufficiently beautiful —which defines the subject position of women in this discursive formation)"(1990: 204). The "male order", as Langbauer criticizes, "promotes the opposition of women versus men"(1990: 2-3) and enhances men as the standard with which every woman must compare herself. Still unable to achieve all male privileges by themselves, these women pursue a quest that will finally give them what they are not allowed to conquer. On the way, sacrifices and pain must be undertaken in the form of beauty rites and body alterations that will finally lead to success. Thus, seeing how traumatic the female quest can be, the question is why women still buy and read these novels. The only possible answer is the textual pleasure they obtain from a novel written for and by women, a novel in which ordinary details are praised as extraordinary, everyday lives become special and love wins the battle, and which fits the perfect model of a "right order" out of which nothing strays and through which real preoccupations are diminished.

In some ways, these blockbusters place the readers in an exterior position from which they can visualize the whole storyline without feeling involved. Such a detached position from the part of readers and viewers seems to be the norm in the last decades. Popular fiction and soap operas are part of an immense range of publications and television programmes that concentrate on a fashionable and socially accepted "voyeurism" of (famous) people's private lives (Roura 1993). The massive popularity of these phenomena is based on a generalized lack of emotional or social implication and an enhancement of volatile values,[19] and, far from disappearing, their social acceptance is increasing.

All these arguments lead to the conclusion that Cathy Kelly's and Marian Keyes' novels do not present a particularly Irish setting but are part of an international cultural trend. The only references to Irish culture and reality are names and places, and so these novels erase any other trace of cultural identification proposing a universal model of behaviour for "modern" women in developed countries.

Seeing the magnitude of this market, one concludes that this type of writing is sustained by the media which, in turn, maintain a basic patriarchal order in which products for women uphold love as the ultimate goal. Prince Charming is disguised as power, stability and success, three elements that give the female heroines, and subsequently the readers' perception of the world, a clear notion of what is expected of them. These blockbusters contribute to escape and detachment from reality and they monitor female behavior in present day society to the point that love remains their ultimate goal. Their universal character addresses modern values that maintain the well-off white family unit as the patriarchal model to follow and readers all over the world come to terms with it as the right way to achieve power, stability and success. Clearly based on inequality between sexes, Kelly's novels confirm and stick to this ideology, adding happy endings that leave the readers with a sweet taste and a feeling of longing.

The Celtic Tiger may have brought with it new ways of material and legal freedom but the patriarchal ideology of De Valera's times still pervades the private and public arenas, keeping women subject to male parameters and a well established order. Cathy Kelly's books try to disguise the old love story paradigm under the form of a fictitious female independence and they display a halo of a fairy-tale that still charms women all over the world in the 21st century.

NOTES
1. Elizabeth Steiner-Scot (1997); Caitríona Beaumont (1999); Mary Daly (1995)(1997).

2. This concept would also mingle with those of "Virgin Mary" and "Mother Church" and so, State and Church enjoyed a close link that would last till the present time.

3. Single mothers often drifted into prostitution, having no legal or economical support.

4. Pat O'Connor affirms that married women who could not have children were smeared and it was often thought that they were in terrible sin, their lack of children being their punishment.

5. In 1901, 53% of Irish women between 25 and 34 years old were single. In 1951 it was 46% and in 1961, 37%. Anne Byrne explains these data according to ideological and economical reasons and affirms that they were seen as "the losers of the system"(1997: 423).

6. They concentrated on demanding structural improvements for rural homes. It also served as an educational forum.

7. This organisation was basically formed by Protestant women.

8. It stated that women and men should earn the same amount of money for doing the same work or work of equal value.

9. Some changes were The Juries Act (1976) that allowed women to become members of juries; The Family Home Protection Act (1976) that forbade the purchase of the family home without the consent of both members of the marriage; The Family Law (Protection of Spouses and Children) Act (1981) that protected women in the case of domestic violence; the category of "lone mother" was taken into account for the first time in 1973.

10. In 2001, 23% of women and 20% of men were at risk of poverty.

11. The 1937 Constitution mentions the word "mother" twice in articles 40.3.3. and 41.2.2. however, the word "father" is never mentioned. This also allows an exchange of the concepts of "womanhood" and "motherhood" in articles 41.2.1. and 41.2.2. where the words "woman" and "mother" are used without distinction.

12. All references and quotations from these books will be followed by the initials of their titles and page numbers.

13. This term has been used by Christine St Peter in her work on contemporary Irish women's fiction *Changing Ireland* (2000) when referring to popular fiction written for and about women.

14. The fact that these novels display multiple female protagonists could be considered by some as an innovation that tries to address women's bonds and a sense of sisterhood. However, this device should rather be understood as a very effective means for the female reader to identify with one or more of the different situations that the characters experience. What is more, this must be considered as a key factor for the success of these novels.

15. This is a key aspect that distinguishes Kelly's novels from those of Maeve Binchy: the former presents urban women who seem to have overcome their country roots, whereas Binchy's novels openly address strong links to the Irish tradition and community. In this way, we could say that Cathy Kelly's style is much more international.

16. In the case of married women this search is changed for infidelity or drugs problems within the couple or, as happens with Emma in *Someone Like You*, a killing desire to become a mother. All these cases follow the traditional pattern of the family unit as the ideal social form of organisation.

17. Although data in 2004 show 34% of women looking after home/family, the categories of unemployed women (2%) and other (2%) could easily swell the total percentage of women who devote most of their time to the household.

18. For more information about Irish sexual morality at the end of 20th century, see Galligan 1998; Hug 1999; Kearney 1988; Barros del Río, 2004.

19. When Marian Keyes was asked in an interview what her idea of pure, unadulterated bliss was, she answered: "A big box of Maltesers, a foot massage and a holiday brochure". Her trivial answer shows the same tone of simplicity as that of her heroines in her books
(available in http://www.mariankeyes.com/books/sushiForBeginners/interviews/QAmetro.html).

REFERENCES

Barros del Río, M. Amor. 2004. *Metáforas de su Tierra. Breve Historia de las Mujeres Irlandesas*. Septem Ediciones.

Beaumont, Caitríona. 1999. "Gender, Citizenship and the State in Ireland, 1922-1990". *Ireland in Proximity. History, Gender, Space*. Eds. S. Brewster, V. Crossman, F. Becket & D. Alderson. London: Routledge. 94-108.

Blau Du Plessis, Rachel. 1985. *Writing Beyond the Ending. Narrative Strategies of Twentieth Century Women Writers*. Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Byrne, Anne. 1997. "Single Women in Ireland: A Re-Examination of the Sociological Evidence". *Women and Irish Society. A Sociological Reader*. Eds. A. Byrne & M. Leonard. Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications. 415-430.

Coakley, Anne. 1997. "Gendered Citizenship: The Social Construction of Mothers in Ireland". *Women and Irish society. A Sociological Reader*. Eds. A. Byrne and M. Leonard. Belfast: Beyond the Pale. 181-195.

Combat Poverty Agency. 2004. "Lone Parent Families and Poverty". January. [online]. Available at http://www.cpa.ie/facts_factsheet_lone.html. [Accessed 18/1/05].

Cosgrove, Art (ed.). 1985. *Marriage in Ireland*. Dublin: College Press.

Coulter, Carol. 1994. "Ireland: Between the First and the Third Worlds". *A Dozen Lips*. Dublin: Attic Press. 93-116.

Central Statistics Office.2004. *Women and Men in Ireland*. Dublin: Stationery Office

Daly, Mary E. 1995. "Women in the Irish Free State, 1922-1939: The Interaction Between Economics and Ideology*". Irish Women's Voices: Past and Present*. Eds. J. Hoff and M. Coulter. 99-106.

_____. 1997. "Oh Kathleen Ni Houlihan, Your Way's a Thorny Way!. The Condition of Women in Twentieth-Century Ireland*". Gender in Modern Ireland*. Eds. A. Bradley & M. G. Valiulis. Massachusetts: UMP. 102-122.

Frye, Joanne, S. 1984. *Living Stories, Telling Lives. Women and the Novel in Contemporary Experience*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.

Galligan, Yvonne. 1998. *Women and Politics in Contemporary Ireland. From the Margins to the Mainstream.* London and Washington: Pinter.

Gerrard, Nicci. 1989. *Into the Mainstream: How Feminism Has Changed Women's Writing.* London: Pandora.

Gray, Breda & Ryan, Louise. 1997. "(Dis)Locating Woman and Women in Representations of Irish National Identity". *Women and Irish Society. A Sociological Reader*. Eds. A. Byrne & M. Leonard. Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications. 517-534.

Hayes, Alan & Urquhart, Diane (eds.). 2004. *Irish Women's History*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press.

Herr, Cheryl. 1997. "The Erotics of Irishness". *Critical Enquiry*. Vol. 17, nº 1. 1-34.

Hug, Chrystel. 1999. *The Politics of Sexual Morality in Ireland*. London: Macmillan.

Kearney, Richard (ed.). 1988. *Across the Frontiers. Ireland in the 1990s*. Dublin: Wolfhound Press.

Kelly, A.A. (ed) 1988. *Pillars of the House. An Anthology of Verse by Irish Women*. Dublin: Wolfhound Press.

Kelly, Cathy. 1997. *Woman to Woman*. London: Headline.

_____. 2000. *Someone Like You*. London: Harper Collins Publishers.

_____. 2002. *Just Between Us*. London: Harper Collins Publishers. More information on the author and her books at http://www.cathy-kelly.com [Accessed 20/01/05].

Keyes, Marian. 1997. *Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married*. London: Arrow Books.

_____. 2000. *Sushi for Beginners*. London: Penguin Books. More information on the author and her books at http://www.mariankeyes.com [Accessed 20/01/05]

Langbauer, Laurie. 1990. *Women and Romance. The Consolations of Gender in the English Novel.* Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press.

Mahon, Evelyn. 1995. "From Democracy to Femocracy: The Women's Movement in the Republic of Ireland". *Irish Society. Sociological Perspectives*. Eds. Patrick Clancy, Sheelagh Drudy, Kathleen Lynch & Liam O'Dowd. Dublin: the Institute of Public Administration. 675-708.

O'Brien, Marie Cruise. 1983. "The Female Principle in Gaelic Poetry" *Woman in Irish Legend, Life and Literature*. Ed. S.F. Gallager. New Jersey: Barnes & Noble Books. 24-32.

O'Connor, Pat. 1998. *Emerging Voices. Women in Contemporary Irish Society*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.

O'Hagan, Claire. (To be published in 2005). "Ideologies of Motherhood and Single Mothers in Ireland" in *Cultural Reflections on Single Maternity in Contemporary Ireland*. Eds. A. Pérez & C. Ramblado. Limerick: The Edwin Mellen Press.

Pelan, Rebecca & Lyons, Ann. 2002. "A Short Note on the Use of "Sex" and "Gender" in Ireland. InBraidotti et.al.(eds.) *The Making of European Women's Studies*. Vol. IV. Athena. 95-98.

Radaway, Janice. 1983. "Women Read the Romance: The Interaction of Text and Context". *FS/Feminist Studies* 9:1 (Spring). 52-78.

Redlich, Patricia. 1978. "Women and the Family". *Women in the Irish Society*. Eds. M. MacCurtain & D. O'Corrain. *Women in the Irish Society, the Historical Dimension*. Dublin: Arlen House.

Rich, Adrienne. 1976. *Of Woman Born. Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: WW Norton & Company.

Roura, Assumpta. 1993. *Telenovelas, Pasiones de Mujer. El sexo del culebrón*. Ed. Gedisa.

Ryan Louise. 1998. "Constructing Irishwoman: Modern Girls and Comely Maidens". *Irish Studies Review*. Vol. 6, n 3. 263-272.

Sánchez-Palencia Carazo, Carolina. 1997. *El Discurso Femenino de la Novela Rosa en Lengua Inglesa*. Cádiz: Universidad de Cádiz.

Skeggs, B. 1997. Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable. London: Sage.

Steiner-Scott, Elizabeth. 1997. "Domestic Violence in Post-Famine Ireland". *Women and Irish History*. Eds. M. Gialanella Valiulis & M. O'Dowd. Dublin: Wolfhound Press.

St Peter, Christine. 2000. *Changing Ireland. Strategies in Contemporary Women's Fiction*. London: Macmillan.