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## A “New Irish Woman” Emerges: Subverting Femininity in Maeve Kelly’s *A Life of her Own*

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**Abstract.** Women in Irish fiction have been mostly the creation of male writers and the embodiment of religious virtues such as purity and passivity, conventionally regarded as “feminine.” Not only the Roman Catholic Church but also the State progressively contributed to the social construct of Irish womanhood as inferior and, above all, domestic. From the 1960s onwards many women writers have tried relentlessly to reimagine women in their fiction. Feminist activist Maeve Kelly is an outstanding example of such writers, whose work remains virtually unexplored. Very often Kelly’s protagonists are women in their conventional roles as wives and mothers who struggle for happiness and independence. This article focuses on her collected stories *A Life of Her Own* (1976), and particularly on her short story “The vain woman.” As Marie Kane (1982) has noted, these stories present us with a “new Irish woman” who is no longer the personification of the Virgin Mary, and who actively rebels against her environment.

**Key Words.** Irish Feminism, Irish Short Story, Maeve Kelly, Empowerment, Rebellious Women

**Resumen.** Las mujeres en la ficción irlandesa han sido en gran medida creadas por escritores varones, encarnando virtudes religiosas tales como la pureza y la pasividad, convencionalmente consideradas como “femeninas.” No solo la Iglesia católica sino también el Estado contribuyeron progresivamente a la construcción social de la feminidad irlandesa como inferior y, sobretodo, doméstica. Desde la década de 1960 muchas escritoras han intentado implacablemente cambiar esta imagen de la mujer en su ficción. La activista feminista Maeve Kelly es un ejemplo sobresaliente de estas escritoras cuya obra se encuentra prácticamente inexplorada. Normalmente, las protagonistas de las historias de Kelly son mujeres que desempeñan su rol tradicional como esposas y madres y que luchan por la felicidad y la independencia. Este artículo se centra en su colección *A Life of Her Own* (1976), y en particular en el relato “The vain woman,” en el que Kelly presenta una “nueva mujer irlandesa” que se aleja de la personificación de la Virgen María y que se rebela activamente contra su entorno.

**Palabras clave.** Feminismo irlandés, relato corto irlandés, Maeve Kelly, empoderamiento, mujeres rebeldes

## Introduction: Constructing and De-constructing Irish Womanhood

Women in Ireland have been traditionally associated with frailty and passivity, qualities that have been also linked to the nation itself. Ireland has often been represented as a woman in both song and literature, following a tradition that can be traced back to eighteenth-century Gaelic poetry. In colonial times, Ireland was portrayed as a woman victimised by the colonising English male, leading womanhood to be associated with inferiority and weakness.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Irish nationalists continued to identify their country as “feminine.” Ireland became Kathleen Ni Houlihan, Dark Rosaleen, Mother Ireland, Sean-Bhean Bhocht, or the Poor old Woman; a woman who needed the help of young Irish men willing to fight and sacrifice themselves to free Ireland from colonial rule. Furthermore, the Devotional Revolution of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century added the cult of the Virgin Mary, and Ireland and Irish women became the embodiment of purity (Igman 2007: 7). The construction of Catholic womanhood drew on the Bible as well as on a series of Papal encyclicals—as noted by Beaumont (1997), and Tighe-Mooney (2011). Encyclicals such as *Rerum Novarum* (1891), *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) or *CastiConnubii* (1930) elaborated on the “natural” role of women. They posited that women should be confined to the domestic sphere and stressed the sanctity of marriage and the prohibition of artificial birth control and abortion.

The Church’s glorification of women’s domesticity permeated the legislation of the Irish Free State. The State intruded into private family life with the banning of divorce and artificial birth control, and consolidated the public image of Irish femininity as wife and mother in De Valera’s 1937 Constitution. Article 41.2.1 stated that “the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.” Furthermore, the terms “wife” and “mother” were used interchangeably in Article 41.2.2, thus explicitly linking women to the domestic.

From the post-De Valera period many Irish women writers have tried to reverse this image of women in their fiction. The majority of these writers have chosen the short story as their medium and many of their stories have been published by Poolbeg Press. Examples of these are Maeve Kelly’s *A Life of Her Own* (1976); Julia O’Faolain’s *Melancholy Baby* (1976); or Emma Cooke’s *Female Forms* (1980). Their stories are predominantly gynocentric and aim to raise awareness of the oppression of women in Ireland. However, the work of these writers was confronted with the male-dominated Irish literary canon. As Workman has pointed out, “though the number of published Irish women writers increased in the 1970s and early 1980s, only one in 10 Irish books printed during this period were authored by women, and this ratio drops to one in 50 when considering mainstream, non-women-oriented presses” (Workman 2016). Women’s work tended to be subjected to scathing comments by male reviewers who were more often biased by the author’s gender. As an instance, we can take critic J.B. Kilfeather’s review on Maeve Kelly’s *A Life of Her Own*:

Women do not have an easy time in Ireland but surely this writer is piling on the agony ... [Many] stories share the same theme — the girl who is left at home to nurse the ailing mother whilst the spoiled son gets all the education and the spoiling ... And then there are the stories of sickness of girls and women. And miscarriages and loutish husbands ... All of which I can well believe and even feel a certain degree of sympathy with the protagonists of the stories, but Maeve Kelly does go on rather much about it. (1977: 14)

This situation reduced the possibility of capturing women experiences in Irish literature or these were, in most cases, told from a male perspective. Only a few women writers such as Mary Lavin, Edna O'Brien or Elisabeth Bowen managed to achieve some popularity. Still, the majority of anthologies of Irish short stories were heavily weighted towards male writers, and women's writing tended to be silenced and marginalised.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, in the last few years Ireland has experienced a strong movement with the aim of recovering Irish women's voices. Already in 1999 Beacon Press had published *A Green and Mortal Sound: Short Fiction by Irish Women Writers*, which included stories that wanted to "tell the reader something about the nature of the lives of women in Ireland" (Desalvo, Walsh & Hogan 1999: xii). In 2001, New Island published *Cutting the Night in Two: Short Stories by Irish Women Writers*, edited by Evelyn Conlon and Hans-Christian Oeser. This collection comprised thirty-four short stories by Irish women writers past and present, all of which had been published before. More recently, in 2014, writer and illustrator Joanna Walsh started the high-profile #readwomen campaign to encourage literary equality and celebrate Irish women's writing. In 2015, New Island published *The Long Gaze Back: An Anthology of Irish Women Writers*, edited by Sinead Gleeson. Due to its popularity, another collection *The Glass Shore: Short Stories by Women Writers from the North of Ireland*, also edited by Gleeson, was published in 2016. These collections served to spark discussion about the erasure of women writers from the Irish literary canon and shed some light on women's lives and experiences. As Alison Walsh said about *The Long Gaze Back* in the *Sunday Independent*: "this collection represents the richness of women's lives, past and present. The joy, the compassion, the anger, the sadness. It's all there" (Walsh 2015). Not only New Island but also the independent publishing company Tramp Press is committed to showcasing literature that has been largely forgotten. So far, it has produced three books in its Recovered Voices Series: *A Struggle for Fame* by Charlotte Riddell, *The Uninvited* by Dorothy Macardle and *Orange Horses* by Maeve Kelly.

This article aims to contribute to recovering these lost women's voices and to help solve the academic neglect that some Irish women writers have suffered. It focuses on the work of Maeve Kelly, quite forgotten until the recent re-printing of her *Orange Horses* by Tramp Press and the publication of *A Last Loving* by Arlen Press, both in 2016. Maeve Kelly is a self-declared feminist who has ceaselessly tried to reimage women in her fiction. Her work has been described as a mirror image of her "lifelong struggle to dispel male complacency and bring marginalised, female experience into the larger national consciousness" (Workman 2016). The protagonists of Kelly's stories are in most cases countrywomen, for whom neither love nor divorce is possible. However, these are not portrayed as passive, self-abnegating martyrs, but rather as women who actively struggle against their environment. This article examines her short story collection *A Life of Her Own* (1976) with special attention to "The Vain Woman". This story can be taken as an example of the dramatisation of the lives of Irish women who were determined by the conventional modes of femininity advocated both in the 1937 Constitution and in Catholic Church teaching. Nevertheless, the protagonist of the story embodies the antithesis of both Catholic and "feminine" values, representing the emergence of a "new Irish woman;" a woman who was no longer voice-less but who rebelled against the Catholic patriarchal society she lived in.

### **Maeve Kelly: Irishwoman Writer and Feminist Activist**

Maeve Kelly is a largely unexplored Irish feminist writer. She was born in 1930 in Ennis, County Clare, and raised in Dundalk, County Louth, Ireland. She settled in Limerick and then moved to London to study nursing at St. Andrew's Hospital. While nursing in London, she pursued postgraduate theatre but had to give up after contracting tuberculosis.

She then went back to Limerick, where she lived and farmed with her husband Gerard O'Brien Kelly, who died in 2013 and with whom she had two children, Joseph and Oona. She had published poetry before her first story appeared in the "New Irish Writing" page of *The Irish Press* in 1971. A year later, in 1972, she won a Hennessy Literary Award and thereafter became a regular contributor to "New Irish Writing." In 1974, she joined the Irish Women's Movement and co-founded the Limerick Federation of Women's Organisations. In 1978, she founded the Limerick Refuge for Battered Wives, called nowadays Adapt House, which she administered for fifteen years.

Kelly has published two short story collections, *A Life of Her Own* (1976) and *Orange Horses* (1990). This second collection contains all the stories in *A Life of Her Own* plus seven others. She has also published two novels, *Necessary Treasons* (1985) and *Florrie's Girls* (1989), and three collections of poems, *Resolutions* (1986), *Lament for Oona* (2005), and *A Last Loving: Collected Poems* (2016), which compiles the two previously published collections along with other uncollected pieces. As other Irish feminist writers such as Mary Dorcey or Emma Donoghue, Kelly has also taken part in the rewriting of fairy tales in *Alice in Thunderland* (1993), a story previously collected in *Ms Muffet and Others: A Funny, Sassy, Heretical Collection of Feminist Fairytales* (1986) and *Mad and Bad Fairies* (1987).

Her two novels meticulously intertwine fiction and biographical content. *Necessary Treasons* (1985) draws on Kelly's experiences establishing a shelter in Limerick. The protagonist of the novel is Eve Gleeson, a young middle-class woman who works in the women's advice centre. At work, Eve witnesses the many struggles that disadvantaged women suffer on a daily basis and their vulnerable position. She becomes increasingly involved in the women's movement and her fiancé, Hugh Creagh, her sisters and friends begin to drift away from her. The much older Hugh, who constantly reprimands Eve, seems to represent the traditional, patriarchal view of Irish society. In the text, Kelly draws attention to the social, political, legal and religious issues that worked against Irish women, preventing them from attaining any sort of independence.

Kelly's second novel, *Florrie's Girls* (1989), seems to be based on her nursing experience in post-war England. The protagonist of the novel is Caitlin Cosgrave (Cos), a seventeen-year-old artistic soul who leaves the family farm in Kerry to train as a nurse in a hospital run by nuns in London. Major themes in the novel are the depiction of medicine as overtly male-dominated, emigration, alienation and loneliness. Kelly pays particular attention to the treatment of women's health by the medical community, the stigmas that surround female corporeality and sexuality, and to the relationship between the Irish and the English, usually shaped by preposterous stereotypes.

### ***A Life of Her Own***

Maeve Kelly's first publication was *A Life of Her Own* (1976), a collection of thirteen short stories. Stories such as "Amnesty," "Journey Home," "Lovers," or "The Last Campaign" depict the hard lives of countrywomen. These are fisherwomen or farmers, such as the spinster sisters of "The False God," who had to milk the cows, cook the meals and work hard in gardens and greenhouses. Women's daily struggle against "a litany of disasters, storm damage, pests, disease, accidents" (Kelly 1976: 56) is accurately described in "The Last Campaign," in which a married couple tries to surmount the slaughtering of their sick cattle. The idea of women's self-sacrifice permeates all these stories. Kelly fiercely denounces the widely held belief that women should abandon their aspirations to devote themselves to the care of their parents and/or farm. This is the case of the title story, "A Life of Her Own", in Aunt Brigid struggles for independence after spending many years as housekeeper for her bachelor brother. She decides to marry Anthony, a friend, in order to leave the family home, a

decision that does not sit well with her brother, Jack. Jack ridicules her for wanting to marry in old age and once she gets married, starves himself to death. Before dying in childbirth, Brigid realises that she still has no life of her own and makes her niece promise that she will train for a profession and become independent. Late marriages appear in several stories in the collection and appear to be frowned upon by society. This is not rare considering that the collection was first published in 1976 and the late 1970s was actually the period when couples married in twentieth century Ireland (Fahey & Field 2008: 28).

In fact, another late marriage is present in “Love.” The story features Mary Dayse, a hard-working farmer who, at forty-five years of age, marries the idle, fifty-year-old Jimmy. Quite surprisingly, Mary gets pregnant and delivers a placid baby. However, the child soon shows symptoms of mental retardation. Jimmy abandons the family and Mary takes care of her beloved child Tommy. When Tom reaches the age of twenty, his mother becomes severely ill and, fearing her death, asks her son to take some medicine if she were to leave him. When Mary dies, Tom gives the medicine to the family’s pets. The animals are revealed to be dead and Tom realises his-mother was trying to poison him. Tom is unable to run the family farm and is taken to a nursing home where he tries to live happily the rest of his life. The story is full of detailed, haunting descriptions of the countryside, as when Tommy is born:

Their son was born in a day when the crooked branches of the apple trees were bared to the east wind shrilling through them. The winter cabbages huddled in rows and the potato pit had the remnants of the night’s frost on top of its straw covering. As naked as the new-born baby the fields lay open to the sky. The cow humped her back at the hedge where a few evergreens gave her shelter and the hens shook their feathers angrily at the cruelty of the day. (Kelly 1976: 36)

In “Love,” Kelly explores themes such as mother-son relationships, affection and compassion, as well as the fear of the stigmatisation of otherness.

Kelly’s “The Tattooed” may reveal some biographical content. The unnamed protagonist of the story is a twenty-five-year-old woman who suffers from tuberculosis. In her “tiny, box-like room” (Kelly 1976: 125) in the hospital she kills time reading and contemplating the romantic relationship between another patient, Mr Mathews, and the gardener. In the story, the illness is treated with realism but also with optimism, and the sanatorium is depicted as a refuge from which to draw strength for a new sallying forth. Kelly also pays particular attention to the compassion and sense of comradeship among the patients. Other stories of the collection, such as “The Sentimentalist”, “Parasites”, or “The Vain Woman” present us with the emergence of what may be coined a “new Irish woman.” Although very different, these stories feature women protagonists who are somehow similar. The three of them are characterised by their non-conformism and share a strong sense of independence, intellectual curiosity and a more open view of sex and sexuality.

“The Sentimentalist” tells the story of two women: the narrator, Jo, and her cousin Liza. Jo is a woman who is not precisely a lover of people. She believes that most people are deceptive and finds “children irritating, the old irritable and the middle aged merely opinionated” (Kelly 1976: 27). She has isolated herself from society and lives on her own in a cottage with the aim of writing a book that will “put all those foreign male philosophers to shame” (32). While Jo finds the nationalist fervour tedious, Liza is a fervent nationalist who “threw herself totally into the Gaelic revival” (28). The story examines the relationship between the English and the Irish—Liza’s deceased parents were English and the family used to live in England—, and issues of colonialism, such as the imposition of a particular language. Jo describes how her family enthusiastically tried to copy Liza’s English accent

while the little girl attempted to acquire Gaelic. While Liza eagerly tries to revive the Gaelic language, Jo believes that

English has been imposed on us, for historical reasons, I accept it and consider it adequate for my needs, a vehicle for communicating thought. I concede that I may have lost something, subtleties of expression more in keeping with my cultural background, not to mention the heritage of tradition which is difficult to translate adequately. However, I have always been a pragmatist and I accept the reality of conquest. (28)

Later in the story, Liza claims that Gaelic Ireland was dead, and that instead of fighting for the nationalist cause she should have fought for political power. When Liza tells her cousin that her house, which she has used as a school for young people to learn Gaelic culture and language, is going to be demolished, Jo abandons her non-involvement and takes up the campaign for her cousin to keep her home. Liza becomes a heroine; a symbol of “the integrity of the past standing against the hollow men of the present” (33). However, following her death, her house is demolished anyway. According to Igman (2007: 204), the story explores how life for women became even more constricting since the founding of the Irish Free State, and remarks the importance for women to put the gender struggle before the nationalist one. Kelly mentions organised groups such as the Gaelic League and the Cumann na mBan and, through Jo’s view, posits that these can mean the “death of the individual” and therefore “retard human development” (29). Jo contends that

one person, standing alone, against the convention of her times, must, if she applies herself, learn wisdom, fortitude and knowledge, and provide the vital link between the generations which must lead to the ennoblement of all womankind. (29)

“Parasites” is narrated in the third person and tells the story of a young, successful Irish woman writer who emigrates to “the other and more powerful island” (45) to escape from boredom and an abusive father. The unnamed protagonist experiences freedom and sexual liberation, dispelling romantic relationships. Eventually, she falls in love with a layabout poet; a freeloader who mistreats her. The protagonist becomes obsessed with him and his work, and stops writing. When the abuse begins, she calls him a parasite and the relationship breaks up. After the breakup the female protagonist goes back to writing. The story explores powerful themes such as racism, toxic relationships and women’s struggle for economical and emotional independence.

All the stories in *A Life of Her Own* deliver a powerful message. Nevertheless, “The Vain Woman” is, perhaps, the most controversial of all. It fiercely criticises the conditions suffered by women not so much as part of the rural economy, but in their roles as unhappy wives and mothers.

### **“The Vain Woman”: A Marriage Rebel**

“The Vain Woman” is number seven in the collection. The story follows the pattern of the female quest, as Ann Wan-Lih Chang contends:

Typically, such stories focus on women who start by accepting passively a socially imposed role and life as wife or mother, subsequently become “bad” by diverging from the traditional patriarchal view of women’s role in Irish society,

and undergo, ultimately, a transformative inner journey of self-discovery which leads them towards emotional independence and individuality. (2016: 34)

As Chang notes, many stories written by Irish women writers feature “a quest motif in which middle-aged women rebel against their prescribed destiny” and become “marriage rebels” (2016: 38). She mentions stories such as Anne Devlin’s “The House” (1986), Clare Boylan’s “That Bad Woman” (1995) or Éilís Ní Dhuibhne “Estonia” (1997). As in Kelly’s “The Vain Woman”, these stories feature women who embark on a creativity process which serves as a conduit to liberate themselves. During this process, women discover a hidden potential power from the psyche which helps them become a “new self.” However, as Chang avers (39), such a goal is not always depicted as being promising, and this is precisely the case of Kelly’s story.

The story, narrated in the third person, features Mary Murphy, an unhappy forty-year-old housewife. Despite the religious connotations of her name, Mary does not precisely fit in the category of a perfect, passive, Catholic wife and mother. From the very beginning, she makes clear her wretchedness and detestation for her inconsiderate husband:

Sitting beside the fire he annoyed her. His legs thrust out to their full length captured most of the heat. She got up from her chair and said “Excuse me” as she bent to lift the lid of the coal box. He did not move. He grunted and craned his neck around her bent back to stare at the television even more fixedly. (Kelly 1976: 63)

Significantly, as Kane (1982: 395) notes, the husband’s name is never mentioned; he is rather referred to as “he” or “him”, highlighting the fact that, although married for twenty years, they are total strangers to each other. Her situation is so miserable that just the thought of her daughter having a boyfriend tortures her. She does not want her to suffer the consequences of being in an oppressive marriage, which she regards as “the end of the world ... The end of life. The end of dreams” (ibid). Mary has gone through “fifteen pregnancies, ten full term births and six surviving children” (ibid), which was not uncommon in Ireland considering that contraceptives for *bona fide* family planning purposes were not legal until 1979.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, it is also suggested that Mary has been at some point victim of marital rape. Such an offense was not criminalised in Ireland until 1990.<sup>4</sup> Before that year, it was a widely held belief that husbands had a right to demand sex whether their wives wanted it or not. The protagonist claims that long ago she “looked for it [sex] herself” (64), but now feels forced to please her husband whenever he wants “a quickie” (64), and tries to avoid intercourse by pretending to be asleep.

What is surprising about Mary is the fact that she actively rebels against her environment. When her husband complains about her miscarriages and compares her to a cow, Mary does not remain quiet: “Any cow in the field can have a calf, he said. It’s natural. I am not on four legs, she remonstrated once, reasonably” (66). Not only does Mary rebel against her husband but also against the Catholic Church. She refuses to go to the church after having a “revelation” while at Sunday Mass. The priest was giving a sermon on the subject of vanity, and referred to the middle-aged woman “who tries to delude herself and others by painting her face” (65). While the priest criticised such attitude, Mary noticed the irony of it all, considering his smothered hair, his clean-shaved face, and manicured nails. When the priest finished, another man, John Thompson, went to the altar and read the lesson. Mary then recalled that women were not allowed to read the epistle because they were considered a distraction to men. While Thompson mumbled on, Mary’s “Joycean ‘epiphany’” (Kane 1982: 396) came:

Then it happened. The revolutionary thought made her gasp. It was all a swindle. It was a man's church for a man's world. The clarity of the revelation was astounding. A terrible oppressive sense of betrayal settled on her. She stared at the tabernacle, the flowers, the candles, at the priest in his lace and John Thompson in his best suit. And she knew nothing mattered, nothing mattered. The words began to sing dizzily in her mind. (65)

The protagonist also expresses her disapproval of the blessing or churching of women. Churching refers to the rite of purification that women should undergo following recovery from childbirth. After remaining at home for several weeks, the woman would go to church where she would thank God for the safe delivery of her child and receive a blessing from the priest. In the Jewish tradition, this ritual was based on Leviticus 12:2-8, where two different time periods were described, depending on whether a male or a female was born (Berger 2011: 121). The rite also recalls the major feast dedicated to Mary's purification in Jerusalem (Purification of Mary), as described in Luke 2:22-40 (Berger 2011: 121-2). As Louise Lewis pointed out in her 2013 column in *TheJournal.ie* "Churching women after childbirth made many new mothers feel ostracised," many Irish women "felt the stigma of being labelled as 'tainted' or 'dirty'," and "their questioning of it was often ignored by family members or neighbours if they dared vocalise it at all." This is precisely Mary's case:

When the baby was born he suggested she go for the blessing. What blessing, she asked. He said his mother has done it after all the children. The Blessed Virgin Mary did it. Did she not know about the Feast of the Purification? ... She had simply thought it was another Jewish custom transferred into Christianity. [However] she went up after Mass to the altar in front of everybody to kneel down before the priest for a blessing and to be purified. Why don't men get purified, she wondered. It's their seed. And why doesn't a woman give me the blessing, she wondered, just for a change. (Kelly 1976: 66)

Mary disowns a religion which has condemned her to constant childbearing so that in the end she has totally lost her identity. In a Lacanian scene, she looks in the mirror and wonders: "I often find it hard to remember *who* I am. Not just my name but my self. I look in the mirror and I say: 'Who are you?' And then I say, 'Who am I? Who is me? What is me?'" (72). She admits being tired of a house which "always smell[s] of nappies," and of spending her life having to wipe and wash babies' bottoms. She describes her life as "a great orgy of pushing food in one end and cleaning the other end" (67), and complains about always having to clean and tidy up after people. She goes further reprimanding her husband for not helping her with housework: "Why don't you pick up your clothes? She said to him. Why do you always have to leave them on the floor? Haven't I enough to do?" (67).

Mary's detestation for her husband and her domestic life comes, to a certain extent, from the fact of having had her artistic talents crushed. She went to Art School for two years but left in order to marry her husband. However, her talents seem to flourish again in middle-age. Once Mary stops going to Mass, she gets interested in philosophy, psychology and sociology. She "re-discovers" herself and is even astonished by "her ability to understand the most complex and abstract of ideas" (70). However, her husband mocks her, and she has to hide her books, reading only when he is not at home. Further, Mary is "careful never to display her knowledge before him" (70).

Mary feels inarticulate and extremely lonely, and only communicates with "the cat and the furniture and whatever she happen[s] to be cleaning at the time" (68), and admits that "her

love for the house [is] a substitute for something unobtainable” (69). However, as Kane (1982: 397) has observed, her situation radically changes when a painter, Patrick Murphy,<sup>5</sup> moves into a nearby house. She immediately likes him and offers to help him clean and decorate the house. Her house then takes second place to number eight, the painter’s house; by chance or not, this number is associated with resurrection and regeneration.<sup>6</sup>

With Patrick, Mary “savours conversations” and finds “miraculous release for the ideas she conjure[s] from her reading” (69), and she even starts painting again. Their relationship, however, is not a stereotypically romantic one; rather, he becomes the butt of Mary’s sarcasm. With him Mary finds her agency and voice, and seems to get the power she lacks at home. When he says that he would prefer her to cook him a meal instead of having her planning new colour schemes for the rooms, Mary replies indignantly that she is not his servant and, “in a burst of revolutionary fervour,” adds: “Cook your own bloody meals” (73).

Nonetheless, the story ends tragically. Mary and Patrick make love too carelessly, “forgetting the large north east facing window and the long rows of gardens” (78). The neighbours are shocked and Mary’s husband discovers her adultery. She seeks comfort in the painter’s house where she laments, crying out in distress, “Ah, my children!” (Kelly 1976: 78). Although she knows her only possibility of happiness is with the painter, her self-sacrificing nature precludes her abandoning her children. The tone, as common to stories that follow the pattern of the female quest, remains ironic until the end, when the parish priest decides to have a word with Mary:

“Christ forgave the woman taken in adultery”, the priest said softly. “She seems to be truly sorry. Can you not be a little Christ-like in Charity?  
 “She has made a mock of me”, he said, “and I’ll never forgive that. She is a vain, lewd woman, but she has my name”.  
 “Are not all women vain?” said the priest. “We have to be strong to make up for their weaknesses. (78)

Eventually, her husband lets her stay but claims that “she’s only a common prostitute and will be treated like one” (78). We are led to believe that Mary’s life becomes miserable again, having to suffer put up with men winking knowingly at each other near her house, as well as women shunning at her. She has a communication from the painter: a picture postcard with the image of Christ crucified with the printed words “Ah, my children”, thus comparing Christ’s sacrifice to Mary’s. The end of the story suggests that Irish women cannot yet celebrate their “liberation” and that still much needs to be done to achieve gender equality and justice.

## Conclusion

Overall, it could be argued that Kelly’s stories denounce the pervasive influence in Ireland of the traditional passive and subservient images of femininity. As an Irish woman writer and feminist activist, Kelly’s relentless advocacy for the rights of women is reflected supremely in her writing. Her fiction explores issues such as women’s imposed self-sacrifice and abandonment of aspirations, emigration, loneliness and alienation. Kelly’s protagonists, however, are strong women who actively struggle against their environment. A clear example of this is Mary, the protagonist of “The Vain Woman”. Mary lives in an Irish community in which, as in the entire nation, womanhood has been constructed upon the foundations provided by nationalism, Catholic religion, and a gendered legislation. However, she radically opposes the ideal of Irish Catholic femininity. She feels deeply unhappy in her excessively demanding role as wife and mother, and makes those around her —particularly her husband— aware of her emotional situation. Kelly does not present us with a subjugated, silenced,

passive martyr, but rather with a revolutionary “new Irish woman” who does not remain silent about her situation. Tired of a life of emotional and intellectual misery, Mary rebels against oppressive institutions such as the Church and marriage, and releases herself in an act of adultery. Mary and Kelly’s other female protagonists find themselves in a relentless quest for agency and happiness, and battle to reclaim their place within the traditional, patriarchal society they live in.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This image of Ireland was reinforced in *Punch* cartoons and illustrations, where Britannia and John Bull were often portrayed as the elder, protective siblings of defenceless Hibernia (Fegan 2002: 50). Poor Hibernia was threatened by manifestations of Irish nationalism such as the Fenians or the Irish National League Land, often depicted as brutish, ape-like monsters.

<sup>2</sup> Take for instance the controversy over the publication of the first three volumes of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* in 1991, which included very few women.

<sup>3</sup> See Health (Family Planning) Act, 1979.

<sup>4</sup> See Criminal Law (Rape) (Amendment) Act, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> The fact that both Mary and Patrick’s surname is Murphy, the most common surname in Ireland, might suggest that his and her life could be that of any Irish person. Also, the religious connotations of Mary’s name and her relationship with Patrick, whose name is that of the patron Saint of Ireland, could be trying to highlight that the relationship between Virgin Mary and Mother Ireland has always been a recurrent trope.

<sup>6</sup> There are several examples in the Bible which associate the number eight with a new beginning. For instance, in the Genesis 7:13, God saved eight people on the Ark in order to have a new beginning for mankind after the flood. Also, the resurrection of Christ, the ultimate new beginning, took place in the eighth day, since Jesus rose on the first day of the next week from the day he was crucified.

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