“It happened to all of us”: Disclosing Sexual Abuse in Catholic Ireland in Roddy Doyle’s *Smile*

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Abstract. In *Smile* (2017), Roddy Doyle represents a society that is still heavily influenced by the moral authority of the Catholic Church and that, therefore, avoids any open discussion about sexuality in any of its manifestations. In the midst of this climate, Victor Forde, the working-class protagonist of the novel, tries to disclose the sexual abuse he suffered as a child in a Christian Brotherhood School. In my article, I argue that the silences and taboos that permeate the society as represented in the novel, and the protagonist’s awareness that his social position made him the perfect target for abuse, condition Victor’s only opportunity for disclosure; this – and the absolute failure of his attempts at divulgence – ultimately frustrates his chances of healing from trauma and of leading an ordinary life.

Key Words. Sexual abuse, Catholic Church, working class, silence, disclosure, Roddy Doyle, trauma.

Resumen. En su novela *Smile* (2017), Roddy Doyle presenta una sociedad que aún se halla bajo la fuerte influencia de los principios morales dictados por la Iglesia Católica y que, debido a ello, evita todo tipo de debate sobre sexualidad en cualquiera de sus manifestaciones. En medio de este clima, Victor Forde, protagonista de la novela y de origen obrero, intentará revelar los abusos sexuales que sufrió de niño en una escuela dirigida por los Hermanos Cristianos. En mi artículo argumento que los silencios y tabús que impregnan la sociedad representada en la novela así como la sospecha que tiene Victor de que su posición social le convirtió en el objetivo perfecto para los abusos que sufrió, condicionan la única oportunidad que surge de contar su historia. El estrepitoso fracaso de esta oportunidad, junto a las condiciones ya mencionadas, truncan de modo definitivo la posibilidad que tenía Victor de sanar sus heridas y de llevar una vida normal y corriente.

Palabras clave. Abusos sexuales, Iglesia Católica, clase obrera, silencio, revelación, trauma.

Introduction

Smile (2017) is one of Roddy Doyle’s most surprising works, as it takes a clear departure from his earlier, mostly realistic fiction, with its supernatural elements and unexpected turns.

Nevertheless, in line with his other work, it has been deemed a success by most reviewers: Terry Hong calls it a “literary treasure” and an “irresistible gem” (32-3), while John Boyne describes it as Doyle’s “darkest and perhaps finest work since *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*” and terms it “a unique novel” (2017). The *Kirkus* review calls it “fresh and bracing” from the very first page (2017). For those readers who are familiar with Doyle’s previous fiction, it will not come as a surprise that, as Christine Perkins asserts, “Doyle’s ability to convey so much meaning through rapid-fire dialog in the Irish vernacular is unsurpassed” (2017). In the words of Luke Brown, “*Smile* is a Trojan Horse” (51) and the secret that it holds explodes in the face of the reader in the very last chapter, shedding a horrific new light over the entire story.

Smile tells the story of Victor Forde, a middle-aged man, born in the late 1950s, recently separated, who has just moved close to the working-class neighbourhood where he grew up. In an effort to create a steady routine for his new life, every evening he goes to *Donnelly’s*, a local pub, where he soon befriends some of its regular patrons. It is also there that Victor meets the mysterious Edward Fitzpatrick, whose presence seems to discomfort everyone. Although Fitzpatrick insists that Victor and he went to the same school together, St Martin’s Christian Brotherhood School, Victor finds it impossible to place him. However, Fitzpatrick seems to know many details of Victor’s life and, to the latter’s horror, he even brings up a particularly disturbing recollection: that one of the Brothers – so Edward claims – used to harbour inappropriate feelings for Victor. The first encounter with Fitzpatrick throws Victor into a maelstrom of memories that are gradually uncovered in the succeeding chapters, becoming darker and more painful. Victor’s narration jumps back and forth between his time at St Martin’s, marked by the violence and abuse he witnessed and suffered there, and his early adult years, when he started a relationship with celebrity chef Rachel. In a rather spiral-like form, the story is built around one particular event that Victor discloses only towards the middle of the novel, namely, that at St Martin’s he was once sexually abused by the Head Brother. As the novel comes to an end, the encounters with Fitzpatrick become increasingly distressing until he finally discloses his true identity. To Victor’s great shock (and that of the readers too, of course), Fitzpatrick reveals that he is none other than Victor’s alter-ego and forces Victor to face the truth that he was systematically raped by the Head Brother and that everything he imagined his life to be (principally his marriage to Rachel) has been nothing but a fantasy. The novel ends with Victor in an emotional turmoil, unable to stop crying.

Most reviews, quite expectedly, focus on the novel’s shocking ending and discuss the relative merits of the narrative device that Doyle uses. On this question, some reviewers are not convinced. James Walton, for example, claims that “in [his] experience, even after two rereads, things fail to fall into place” (45). In a similar manner, Luke Brown comments that “what has been a subtle excavation of a repressed consciousness suddenly employs the pyrotechnics of *Gone Girl*-type thrillers, praised for their unexpected twists. [...] A narrative explosion that burns so brightly also scorches much of value” (251). Indeed, as Aída Díaz affirms, “the ending of *Smile* is very different from everything Doyle has written before” (10), and for this alone the novel surely deserves particular critical attention. The experimental form that Doyle has employed in *Smile* evidently sets the novel apart from his earlier texts: “In the case of *Smile*, Doyle goes beyond what he has done before as a writer: he writes a novel inside a novel, which clearly reveals the metafictional character of the text” (Díaz 10). However, unlike this rather formalist-centred criticism, in my paper I want to discuss Doyle’s evocation of Irish society at the time the story unfolds, as I believe that this approach provides a far more constructive view of the novel’s deeper attainments, which are otherwise obscured by the heavy focus on its unexpected closure. Before I continue, I want to clarify my use of the term “Irish society”, since to any reader familiar with Doyle’s work it might seem an overgeneralisation, as his fiction, and *Smile* is no exception, is typically set in Dublin.

However, in this particular instance, as cases of clerical abuse affected the whole of Ireland, I would suggest that Dublin society here can very plausibly also stand for the wider society of the Republic of Ireland.

My argument is that *Smile* presents a critique against a conservative society which, under the heavy influence of the Catholic Church, not only avoided an open discussion about Irish people's sexuality, but also – and far more damagingly – sanctioned the violent and sexual abuse that innocent children suffered inside Catholic institutions. The novel shows how these issues condition Victor's disclosure of the sexual abuse he personally experienced, frustrating his chances of healing from trauma and, therefore, of living an ordinary life. Furthermore, I would argue that *Smile* exposes the unmistakeable tendency of this abuse to be aimed at members of the working-class and that, due to this and as I will fully discuss below, it constitutes part of a body of novels, written by Dublin working-class authors, that following Michael Pierson's analysis in *Writing Ireland's Working Class. Dublin After O'Casey* (2011), developed a "broader critique of conservatism in Irish society by returning its repressed sexual monsters to the forefront of literature" (194). Before I begin my analysis, I believe it is essential to highlight that, in my discussion of the abuse that Victor suffers, I am of course focusing on the author's representation of this and not, more generally, on real-life stories of abuse. It is not remotely my intention to trivialise or simplify such a complex, delicate and deeply disturbing subject through this necessarily more limited approach. But, obviously, a fuller discussion of this issue is greatly beyond the scope of this paper.

The Origins of Irish "Prudery"

In order to fully grasp the conservative atmosphere depicted in *Smile*, some understanding is needed of how this reticence towards the public discussion of sexuality came about. Following Tom Inglis' research on the history of Irish sexuality, and in particular, his article "Origins and Legacies of Irish Prudery: Sexuality and Social Control in Modern Ireland" (2005), "the Catholic church and (through clerical influence) the state were major players in creating [Ireland's sexual] regime" (10), which consisted of a culture of repression and self-denial. What is special in the case of Ireland, as compared to other countries such as the United Kingdom, is not particularly the type of sexual regime, but rather "how long this Victorian regime lasted and how deeply it seeped into the minds and bodies of the Irish" (Inglis 11). That is, Inglis traces Irish attitudes to sexuality back to the Victorian era, during which it came to be acknowledged that "the progress from savagery to civilization depended on the subjugation of sex, not its release or aggrandizement" (13). Part of the strategy to civilize society was therefore "to silence and ignore sex" and to "[ban it] from sight and conversation" (Inglis 14). This moralism, which at first was mainly upheld by the new bourgeoisie, spread to the other social classes at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Inglis 15). Inglis goes on to explain how, in Ireland, "as the nineteenth century progressed, sex became increasingly problematic. It had to [be] watched, supervised, and suppressed" (17). Although "this rigorous and censorious regime" (Inglis 24) was orchestrated by "the Catholic Church, through its teachings, censures, and prohibitions" (Inglis 32) and "enacted by priests, nuns, and brothers" (Inglis 32); it was not only encouraged and supervised by the Church and the state, but also by teachers and parents (Inglis 24).

In the conclusions to his article, Inglis suggests that "the overriding reason why Victorian prudery lasted so long, ran so deep, and encountered so little opposition was that it meshed so closely with the teachings of the Catholic church, which in turn became an essential link in the initial modernization of Irish society" (30). It was not until 1950 that a transition took place "away from a homogeneous and almost absolute Catholic moral hegemony" (Inglis 28). As I will argue, by referring to a number of scenes in *Smile*, the

society depicted here is still greatly under the influence of this moral framework and, therefore, avoids and even punishes any transgressions from a perceived *norm*, imposing a silence and creating taboos that directly affect Victor's healing process.

Abuse in Catholic Institutions

Doyle's representation of Victor as a victim of sexual abuse shares many similarities with the experience of non-fictional victims of sexual abuse who were incarcerated in Catholic institutions throughout Ireland in the twentieth century. Before engaging directly with the text, it is helpful to bear in mind the fact that thousands of cases of abuse took place in Catholic institutions throughout Ireland, the role that both state and society had in perpetuating such abuse, and how class played a key part in the institutionalisation of very many of the child victims. In 2007, Harry Ferguson described how *States of Fear*, a TV series that was aired on RTÉ television in the late 1990s, exposed the abuse suffered by children in industrial schools in Ireland:

The *States of Fear* series and the book based on it, *Suffer the Little Children* (Raftery and O'Sullivan, 1999), offered compelling evidence that children in care of the State, who were reared in industrial and reformatory schools run by religious orders, were systematically abused. It showed that in the industrial school system children were often routinely starved, beaten, humiliated, sexually abused, deprived of education and basic knowledge about life, and their emotional needs were often totally neglected. (124)

According to Fred Powell *et al.* in their 2009 study concerning The Ryan Report, "during the period 1936-70, 'a total of 170,000 children and young persons [...] entered the gates of the 50 or so industrial schools' (Ryan Report, 2009, Volume 1, paras 3.01-3.04)" (8) existing in Ireland. Although in 1976 "the government reluctantly established an official enquiry into the industrial and reformatory school system, known as the Kennedy Committee", it was not until the late 1990s that "the survivors' story" was told "to a mass audience for the first time" (Powell *et al.* 12). In this study, Powell *et al.* also try to ascertain responsibility for these crimes. One of its most upsetting findings is that the "Kennedy Report (1970), which recommended the closure of the industrial and reformatory schools system [...] decided not to disclose the abusive nature of the care regimes, leading to accusations of a 'cover-up' and 'whitewash' (Arnold, 2009, pp. 67-70)" (12). Hence, although the reality of the abuse was known – at least to the government – it took another twenty or thirty years for the truth to become known to the population as a whole.

There are several reasons why children ended up in these institutions. Raftery and O'Sullivan (1999) identified "the underlying cause of institutionalisation" of children as "structural poverty" (Powell *et al.* 10), however, other researchers, namely Ferguson (2007) and Maguire (2009), have added that "the interaction between poverty and family circumstances often became the trigger for institutionalisation" (Powell *et al.* 10). Although the main reason for institutionalising children, according to Raftery and O'Sullivan (1999) was the "lack of proper guardianship" (as, for instance, in the case of orphans), Ferguson argues that other decisive factors were abuse and neglect (126). Despite acknowledging the State's guilt in not economically supporting poor families and then punishing them by removing their children from parental custody (127-8), Ferguson nevertheless insists on the fact that "it is crucial to understand that in many cases children were also taken into care because of child cruelty and neglect" (128). The key aspect of Ferguson's approach is that he links the concept of neglect to "sexual morality and the notion of 'moral danger'" (130). The

children of parents considered deviant were “viewed as in moral danger”, because of the “(Victorian) middle-class notion of childhood ‘innocence’”, meaning that “the child was viewed as being born innocent and it was the environment which led to corruption” (Ferguson 132). Consequently, Ferguson highlights the belief that “abuse or neglect had ‘polluted’ and contaminated the child with ‘impure’ adult knowledge” (132). And so, to institutionalise many of the children was to “mould [them] into the kinds of good citizens that the Church and the State wanted them to be” (Ferguson 132). The implications of this were that the community itself participated in the institutionalisation of neglected or abused children. According to Ferguson,

... this was, then, a social practice that had huge public legitimacy, even among the poor who clearly frequently called the [National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children or the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children] to investigate standards of child care and ‘neglectful’ parenting in neighbouring families. (129)

Precisely in light of this, Powell *et al.* also affirm that “the key social institutions within Irish society – Church, state and the voluntary sector – failed needy children (19)”, and they conclude that “the clergy’s moral ambivalence towards these victims of child poverty was shared by both the post-independence Irish state and civil society” (22). In *Smile* it becomes clear that it is not only the fault of the Church, through the crimes committed by Victor’s teachers, but also that of the state and, indeed, of ordinary people that Victor is left helpless both as a child and as an adult. It is not one single institution that has failed him; rather, it is an entire system¹.

The fact that the great majority of children who were incarcerated and abused came from poor backgrounds renders the issue of class inescapable. In an article on Christian Brother orphanages and industrial schools, Coldrey (2000) suggests that “class was a key factor in the whole business” (348). This is in accordance with ideas put forward by Ferguson, since, as Coldrey claims, the common aim shared by the Christian Brother institutions was to “make respectable working class adults from rough working class youth. They wished to recast the proletarian family, to reform the improvident working class culture, and to tame the undisciplined behaviour of its young people” (352). Indeed, Ferguson goes even further and states that “in its deep connections to class and notions of nationhood, in its own way this was nothing less than a persecutory form of ‘ethnic cleansing’” (133). In *Writing Ireland’s Working Class. Dublin After O’Casey* (2011), Pierse dedicates an entire chapter to the analysis of sexuality in the lives and literature of the working class. As Coldrey and Ferguson, Pierse claims that “class was not incidental but integral to the functioning of this system and, moreover, to the maintenance of the state in which it prospered” (211). Through a detailed reading of the testimony of Christine Buckley (a survivor of abuse and campaigner for abuse victims), Pierse finds that

Buckley and others also stress that there was a broader, systematic, socio-economic aspect to the abuse, which reflected general power relations and class interstices across the society that tolerated it. Buckley conveys how the religious orders themselves were acutely aware of this power imbalance and relied upon it as a justification for their behaviour. (209)

This last aspect of power relations is precisely the facet that becomes most visible in *Smile*: as I will argue below, in showing how the Head Brother at Victor’s school exploits Victor’s

particularly vulnerable situation, Doyle represents the conflict that the poor and powerless members of society faced under the strong dominion of the Church.

***Smile*: Silence and Taboos**

Irish society, as depicted in *Smile*, is still greatly influenced by the Catholic moral authority that I discussed above. Although in contemporary Ireland, the attitude towards the Catholic Church has undeniably changed, and radically so in certain sectors of society, and it no longer enjoys the same status as it once did (especially prior to the 1980s, after which a gradual decline in the people's confidence in and esteem for this institution began to take place) (Maher & O'Brien, 2017; Ganiel, 2016, 2018), in the novel, the members of Catholic institutions still hold a special status and, for most characters, it is often unsafe to state an open, transgressive opinion on sexuality. Such is the society in which Victor grows up and to which he constantly refers throughout his narrative; it is a system that, according to Valerie Sayers, with its "authority, discipline, and silence [...] crushe[s] Victor Forde's sense of self" (n.p.). Aligning with this idea of silence, Victor produces a particularly suggestive remark (not least because of its multiple possible interpretations): while explaining how his reputation – he has become a minor celebrity – is based not on tangible factors but, instead, on a few appearances in the media and the mere promise of a book he is supposed to be writing (in fact, he is not), Victor says that "in Ireland you can get along for a long time before the truth starts to matter" (38). For the *knowing* reader, this might be a nod towards the novel's ending, perhaps referring to first-time readers who will never suspect that the truth of Victor's story will turn out completely different to what they are being led to believe in the narrative. At a deeper level, however, in keeping with the historical context and the main theme of this novel, it may refer to the collusion between the Catholic Church, the state and civil society to sanction the abuse inflicted on thousands of children in Catholic institutions. At all events, Victor's comment can be linked to one of the major problems addressed in *Smile*, namely, the difficulty of having an open and healthy discussion about sexuality. By assessing a number of scenes in *Smile*, I would like to suggest how this atmosphere of secrecy, replete with taboos, directly affects the lives of certain characters, and most especially of Victor himself.

One of these scenes takes place soon after Victor is invited to a radio programme in which he states his opinion in favour of abortion; it is 1983, around the time of the first abortion referendum in Ireland. As a direct consequence of this, Victor is forced to move out of his mother's house, presumably to protect her, as "someone painted a cross on the front door and wrote 'Killer' on the step with the rest of the paint" (78). Victor's mother, in tears, asks him why he had to talk about abortion. When, in turn, Victor asks her whether she also believes that it is murder, her answer is very clear: "No, I don't. But I won't be jumping up and down telling people that" (79). In relation to this same phrase, Sayers suggests that "it is that insistence on silence that maddens Victor as the novel builds to confront vile sexual abuse" (n.p.).

A similar event takes place when Rachel visits the Irish Family Planning Association clinic, also in the mid-80s. I have already observed that the relationship between Rachel and Victor is only a fantasy, although Rachel is real. Rather than questioning the veracity of this anecdote, then, I read it as something that might actually have happened to Rachel and, since she is a public figure, Victor could have learned through the media or, if not, something that Victor knows would be likely to happen to any woman in a similar situation. This event occurs after Rachel has announced in an interview that Victor and she are planning on having children. "*At some point in the future – loads of them, actually. But not just now*" (156, original emphasis). Victor clarifies that this implies one thing: contraception. Once again, the

consequences of publicly displaying an attitude that goes against hegemonic morality are severe:

Rachel visited the Irish Family Planning Association clinic on Cathal Brugha Street. She walked past the prayer groups reciting the rosary outside. And she was recognised. *Hoor. Slut. Prostitute.* She was followed. She felt the drops of holy water hit the back of her head. She saw the spit on the back of her jacket when she got home to the loft. (156)

Although Rachel's outspokenness also sparks admiration in other people, the threats never end: "She was reviled and loved – adored, admired. People liked her and were wary, frightened of her. She was sent razor blades in envelopes, and holy medals. And recipes and job requests. And proposals and shit and threats and invitations" (157).

Another example of the risk of stating a controversial opinion on sexual matters can be found in chapter six, which is entirely devoted to an interview that Victor conducts with a young Fine Gael TD, Aileen Clohessy. This interview turns out to be a string of surprising revelations, such as the fact that she thinks she is not cut out for her job (70) and that she does not believe in everything that her party stands for (70-1). Nevertheless, the most controversial moment takes place when Victor asks Aileen about the upcoming referendum on abortion:

It was 1983, just three weeks – I think – before the first abortion referendum.

[...]

–It's dreadful, she said. –I hate it.

–Why?

–I had an abortion, she said. –I've never regretted it.

–Does your family know?

She shook her head.

–No.

–And this is on the record?

She nodded.

–Yes, she said. –I'll tell them. (71)

The impact of this interview and, more precisely, of this last confession is – as Victor sums it up in a later chapter – that "a sitting TD, daughter of a junior minister in the Cosgrave coalition, a member of a party that was recommending that the country vote Yes for the rights of the unborn child, had revealed that she'd had an abortion" (77). What I want to stress the most, however, is the way in which the chapter ends, by stating that "she died five months later" (72). Although this final revelation could be taken as merely informative, it sheds an entirely new light over the meaning of this chapter. The fact that her impending death is emphasised after she has revealed her secret leads to the idea that she only does so because she knows that she is going to die soon and that her life and career will not be affected by the consequences of speaking her mind so openly. A small clue at the beginning of the chapter helps to support this reading: during his meeting with Aileen, Victor notices that "her black hair seemed stuck on, somehow, not her own" (68), which might indicate that she is using a wig to hide the signs of an illness² and, therefore, is fully conscious of her situation. What repercussions Aileen might have suffered from her frankness during the interview can be inferred from the two previous scenes described above. The fact that she has not even been able to tell her family about the abortion indicates how deep this fear of being judged and possibly punished has seeped into the minds of certain characters.

Taken together, these three scenes illustrate how a fear of repercussion from breaking certain taboos is reflected in *Smile* through a heavy silence around sexuality. Most significantly, in his autobiography *Beyond Belief* (2009), Colm O’Gorman³ – a survivor of clerical sexual abuse – stated that “abuse is only possible in a silent world” (cited in Powell et al. 12). It is against this silence, against the consequences of questioning hegemonic morality, that Victor will attempt to disclose the abuse he suffered as a child. In doing so he will not only be subverting this morality, but he will be threatening to expose the hypocrisy of one of the most powerful institutions in Ireland at that time.

Another crucial aspect that, as mentioned above, is amply represented in *Smile* is the dominance of the Catholic Church over society. This can be ascertained through the behaviour of the Brothers at Victor’s school. The representation of the Catholic Church in the novel is strongly similar to the way in which the institution is perceived by some of the critical voices referred to earlier in this discussion. Sayers, for example, comments on the wide reach that the Church had in public institutions (n.p.), and both Ferguson (137) and Powell *et al.* (18) stress, respectively, the “unquestionable authority” of the experts at the industrial schools and the “unchanged subservience” of the State towards the Church.

In *Smile*, the most visible feature of the Church’s special status in society is arguably the way in which the Brothers at Victor’s school exercise violence with absolute impunity. One of the most outrageous episodes occurs when one of the Brothers brutally headbutts a student on the nose, after which Victor explains that

nothing happened; there were no consequences. Toner went home with a broken nose after Murphy sent him to the Head Brother’s office. And Toner would have felt lucky when he got out of the Head Brother’s office without being assaulted again. That was the thing: it wasn’t assault. Not back then. (16)

This situation is so normalised that Victor admits “I never thought I was witnessing anything illegal. Even being felt up by a Brother was just bad luck or bad timing” (16). He asserts with painful truthfulness that “the Brothers knew they were safe” (16). In fact, Victor knows very well that Toner will not tell his parents about the assault: “Toner wouldn’t have told his parents. He’d give them a story. A football in the face, or a hurley, a slammed door, an elbow; the school was full of good believable ways to break your nose” (16). *Smile* does not record any instance of a parent’s reaction to the Brothers’ extreme methods and it is not clear whether any other child ever talks about the abuse that goes on at the school, although it does not seem probable. This is seen rather darkly in one of Victor’s confessions⁴ about being raped by the Head Brother:

The blood on my underpants. I tried to wash it off but there was still a stain and I couldn’t throw them out cos I only had two pairs. And I even hoped Mam would notice the stain and I was scared shitless she would. The fuckin’ shame – the consequences. And no one asked why I was late home from school all those times. None of the lads asked why I had to stay behind. (211)

Victor’s stupefaction at how nobody around him noticed what was happening might be read as a veiled accusation. It is obvious that he was unable to express what he was going through, yet if somebody else had voiced suspicions, they might perhaps have saved Victor. But the most likely scenario (more likely, that is, than ignorance) is that people were simply too scared or horrified to act, so they chose to stay silent.

This sort of behaviour from the members of Victor’s own society clearly mirrors the social behaviour in another of Doyle’s novels, *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996).

Indeed, in comparing *Smile* and *The Woman*, Díaz similarly argues that “Victor [...] realizes that the Brothers’ behaviour is ignored by society” (5) and that he and Paula Spencer – the protagonist of *The Woman* and *Paula Spencer* (2006) – are “victims of a society which sanctions abusive behaviour” (6).

The representation of this social “complicity” with the Church reaches its climax when Victor discloses – live on radio – the abuse that he suffered. Having failed to prepare a topic to discuss during his broadcast, Victor suddenly decides to tell his story. Nevertheless, what could have been a great opportunity to start a process of healing, or to see the man who abused him called to account for his crimes, turns out to be a major failure. From the very start, it is plain that the perpetrators will be protected, revealing the immunity extended to the Brothers. Even before Victor’s piece begins, the producer warns him to reveal “no names” (168), a warning that is repeated later by Myles Bradley, the show’s host, who says “*Don’t name*” (169, original emphasis). Although Myles might welcome the controversy that Victor’s account will entail – “[Myles] looked embarrassed, excited, scared” (*Smile*, 168) –, as it has the potential to improve the show’s rating, it is clear that the main priority is to avoid a scandal, rather than to offer Victor a chance to claim justice. When Victor is finally able to leave the building – having suffered a breakdown whilst hiding in the toilets – rather than feeling relief, he feels the presence of his abuser looming over him: “I was terrified. He’d have heard it. The Head Brother would have heard it” (169). Victor knows how dangerous the Brothers can be and now he has provoked them: “He was out there, still teaching. And I was frightening him – and all of them” (169). Moreover, as with the other scenes already commented on, the response to Victor’s account is one of pure hatred: “There was uproar too. There was always uproar. I was undermining the Church and the education system; I was assaulting the country itself. I was a blackguard and a self-serving fuckin’ little queer” (173).

Reactions to Victor’s Account

As this last comment indicates, Irish society as represented in *Smile*, is not prepared to accept the truth that Victor, through his account, has revealed. Hence, both the dominance of the Church and the people’s fear and refusal to engage in transgressive discussions on sexuality, have a major impact on Victor’s ability to speak about the abuse he suffered. Furthermore, these questions inevitably affect people’s understanding of Victor’s account, making their responses to it almost always negative.

Returning to Victor’s disclosure during Myles’s radio show, the short interview that follows Victor’s account is presented as a failure. As soon as Victor has finished his story, the topic is quickly reviewed both by himself and Myles through a series of trivial anecdotes. Instead of offering support and showing concern, Myles – responsible for leading the conversation – shifts the focus from Victor’s account of the abuse by recounting a completely irrelevant story of his own truancy from school:

My account of the Brother molesting me had taken only three minutes. Some other presenter might have kept me on a straight line, but this was shocking stuff and Myles Bradley had had enough. And then, so had I. I listened to myself, making small of it. Myles even had his own story to add [...] Eight minutes after I’d told Myles and the rest of Ireland that a Christian Brother had placed his hands on my penis, I was laughing. (172)

Díaz relates Victor’s laughter here to Doyle’s use of comedy: “Victor is doing precisely what Doyle has done throughout his career until the publication of *Smile*: he has used comedy to deal with the most difficult and harsh situations without trivialising them” (7). As I shall

argue very shortly, however, in the case of *Smile*, it is precisely this use of trivialisation that leads Victor to his sense of desperation. Before closing Victor's intervention, Myles attempts to limit or even wholly undermine the significance of Victor's claims, in effect trivialising them almost into meaninglessness:

- This was just one Christian Brother we've been talking about.
- Yes.
- And it happened —?
- Once. (172)

In a 2015 study into adult disclosure of child sexual abuse, Dafna Tener and Sharon B. Murphy established a list of elements that contribute to negative responses to disclosure of abuse. These elements are "signs that listeners are uncomfortable and hostile to the story, listeners not believing and dismissing the story, or listeners minimizing and normalizing the abuse, as well as listeners refusing to further discuss the subject or changing the subject" (397).⁵ According to these same experts, one of the effects that a negative response to disclosure can have is "a deterrent to further disclosure" (397). Clearly, during the interview, these factors might, indeed, act as a deterrent to Victor's ability to tell the full story of his abuse and, therefore, act as an obstacle to starting a process of healing. In contrast, the same study also mentions that "the repeated telling [of the abuse] was interpreted by survivors as a healing experience" (397).

The manner in which Myles conducts the interview contributes to minimalising and normalising this abuse (as does his refusal to continue discussing the subject). However, worse still, other listeners to whom Victor tells the same story either show incredulity or else directly blame Victor for the episode. One of the men hearing Victor's account asks "You just let him do it?" and goes on to claim that "I'd have fucking killed him" (163). Other people wonder "Did anything like that ever happen to any of us?" (163), to which the listeners respond by shaking their heads (164). In this respect, their reactions to the figure of Fitzpatrick are also revealing. Most of the characters, including Victor himself, feel uncomfortable around Fitzpatrick. In a highly engaging observation, Fernández⁶ pointed to a striking resemblance between Victor and his alter-ego Fitzpatrick, and the character of Dorian Gray and his portrait in Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* (1890). Like Dorian's portrait, Fitzpatrick would concentrate all that is evil and bad in Victor's life and, therefore, his mere presence is extremely unpleasant and frightening to everybody else. It is, in Fernández's view, as if Fitzpatrick had escaped from Victor's (metaphorical) attic and spent his time roaming the streets of Dublin. In one scene in particular, speaking of one of his new friends at the pub, Victor comments that "he didn't want to look at Fitzpatrick. I could see that. They all wanted Fitzpatrick to go away" (138). If, as I read it and broadly agreeing with Fernández's interpretation, Fitzpatrick is a sort of incarnation of the truth, that is, of the abuse that Victor suffered, and by extension, the possibility that abuse might be occurring in Irish Catholic institutions, the same comment takes on a far deeper and far more disturbing meaning: "he didn't want to look at *the truth*. I could see that. They all wanted *the truth* to go away".

Class and the Imbalance of Power

In *Writing Ireland's Working Class* (2011), Pierse dedicates the chapter "Return of the Oppressed: Sexual Repression, Culture and Class" to discussing sexuality and class through two texts by Christy Brown and Dermot Bolger.⁷ In this chapter, Pierse also addresses the problem of the class bias in industrial schools:

This puritanical frame of mind [of the Irish] led to particular social evils (...), including violence, alcoholism and fanaticism. Much of this experience found perhaps its most concrete expression in Ireland's infamous network of industrial schools, which virtually imprisoned thousands of working-class children. (192-3)

I have already discussed how Irish society became obsessed with the idea of sexual purity and how the industrial schools were used as a place to separate those considered "impure" or "unchaste", from the "respectable" citizens. Pierse explains that "the place where this 'visibility' of the unchaste was most likely to find expression was amongst Dublin's working class" (193). Consequently, he argues that "it is unsurprising, then, that writers of working-class Dublin were developing a broader critique of conservatism in Irish society by returning its repressed sexual monsters to the forefront of literature" (194) and that in these writers' literature "sex and its suppression are employed to criticize a sclerotic culture more generally" (194). *Smile* contributes to this critique by revealing the ways in which the Christian Brothers at Victor's school exploit the vulnerable situation of their pupils to their advantage. Doyle's novel reinforces the notion that in Victor's case the issue of class is not at all incidental; rather, it is precisely this factor that conditions him for the abuse he suffers.

Citing Christine Buckley, Pierse explains that she "conveys how the religious orders themselves were acutely aware of this power imbalance [between themselves and their victims] and relied upon it as a justification for their behaviour" (209). This power imbalance is represented very early in *Smile* through the difference between the Christian Brothers' economic status and that of Victor's family. Victor lives in an estate "where most of the trees hadn't survived, where some of the footpaths hadn't been finished" (20). When he describes his childhood home (at the time when he is supposedly showing it to Rachel), he confesses his embarrassment at

the smallness of the room, and the cold in there; it was hardly ever used. The narrowness of the hall, the wallpaper, the little boy on the wall with the big tearful eyes, the line of porcelain cats, even the photograph of my father. They –it– embarrassed me. I had to swallow back the apology. I knew how it would sound but it was still a fight. (107)

In a very similar passage, Victor describes his childhood room and remembers how he did not want Rachel "to see the Derby County poster or the absence of a headboard on my bed, or the damp patch and the corner of peeling wallpaper over the window, or the view from the window of O'Connell's back garden and the craters dug in the grass by their Alsatian" (108). In opposition to Victor's situation, the Christian Brothers are represented as being relatively wealthy. When reminiscing about his old school days, Victor remembers a joke his father once made:

We came out of the lane, onto the Malahide Road. [...] We crossed, pushing and running, to Griffith Avenue. The Brothers owned all this. My father had said that the night before, when I'd gone with my mother to see him in the hospital. He said he was impressed that mendicants like the Brothers could hold such vast tracts of land. (61)

However, it is not only a poor financial situation that conditions Victor and his family. Victor's dependency on the Christian Brothers resides in the fact that they might be Victor's only chance to receive a higher education. The importance of such an opportunity to Victor's

family can be gathered from the following scene, which takes place when he arrives home after his first day at the Christian Brotherhood School:

–So, said my mother when I got home.
 She was excited, young; she'd never gone to secondary school, herself.
 –How was school?
 –Great, I said.
 I meant it.
 Her eyes were wet.
 –I'm so proud of you, Victor.
 She picked up my sister and made her kiss me, then made egg and chips to celebrate the occasion. (21)

Later in the novel, Victor explains that “I was the first in my family, both sides, to have any kind of third-level education; we didn't know what that phrase, third-level education, meant” (43). Similarly, when remembering the occasion on which he took a tape recorder home in order to test it (before his interview with Aileen Clohessy), Victor says that “bringing home that Sony cassette recorder was one of the nicest things I ever did for my mother. I had a job that she understood and that wouldn't have come my way without the education that neither she nor my father had had” (67).

However, this power imbalance between Victor's family and the Christian Brothers is brought to an extreme when Victor's father becomes terminally ill. The Head Brother of the school, aware of the complicated situation that the family is going through, exploits it to abuse Victor. Victor remembers how the Head Brother “asked me about my father; he knew my father was back in hospital. He asked how he was, how my mother was coping, if I was a support to her. *I'm sure you are*. We were all in his prayers, he told me, his and all the Brothers” (163, original emphasis). The Head Brother's hypocrisy is soon exposed; he tells Victor to go to his room after class so that he can teach him how to wrestle and how to protect himself: “he knew that, without my father at home I was the man of the house and he was going to teach me how to defend myself” (163). It is precisely during these wrestling sessions that the abuse takes place. What makes Victor's situation even worse is that his mother is so devastated by her husband's illness and eventual death that, for quite some time, she is simply unable to function normally. For months, the situation that Victor encounters when he comes home from school is described in this harrowing scene:

I was the boy at the end of the bed. Sitting, waiting, for hours, for my mother to sit up and stop whimpering. It was the way I'd found her day after day when I came home from school in the months after my father died. [...] I remembered my mother's face when she sat up, trying to make herself the way she should have been – not the woman who'd been lying in the bed. (157)

Moreover, the power imbalance and class bias that were behind the idea of the working class being perceived as unchaste, and, therefore, deserving of violence and abuse (Ferguson, 2007), is also represented in *Smile*, through a malicious comment that the Head Brother makes when he says to Victor: “You're old enough to stop me” (213). This terrible phrase conveys the idea that Victor could actually have stopped the abuse from happening and that if he did not do so, it can be taken as his implicit wish for it to continue. It cruelly puts the weight of the responsibility of what happened squarely onto Victor's shoulders and imbues him with a feeling of guilt and shame that he carries for the rest of his life. The phrase represents the ultimate manipulation by the Head Brother, his perfect guarantee of safety, and

it springs from the notion that Victor deserves this punishment, because something inside him is sufficiently *crooked* to warrant abuse rather than resisting it.

And yet *Smile*'s representation of class-biased abuse does not end here, with the Church's exploitation of the vulnerable situation of the poorest members of society. The novel precisely highlights the fact that the abuse that took place in these religious institutions was practically exclusive to the members of the lower social classes. *Smile* begins with Victor's return to a working-class neighbourhood, after spending most of his life living in a better part of the city – or so he claims – with no contact with anybody from his original background: "[...] I had [no friends] either. I'd got rid of them all. I'd drifted away from my old life, from the lads I'd grown up with, friends – boys I'd loved and hated, woken up thinking about. I'd kept in touch with no one" (92). The reason for this, according to Victor, is his marriage to Rachel, who moves in higher social circles and takes him to her world: "I learnt the verb, 'to fuck', from Rachel. Where I came from, where and when I grew up, men rode women. [...] I left my country and my class behind and started fucking Rachel" (123). However, as this turns out to be Victor's fantasy, I read another meaning into his moving away from his childhood world. I believe that Victor's rejection of his class, of his neighbourhood and even, for some time, of his father – "...I loved my mother. I don't know if I loved my father" (108) – spring from his awareness that poverty and the loss of his father were precisely the circumstances that conditioned him for the abuse he suffered. There are several passages in *Smile* that may lead to this conclusion and most of them refer to the striking differences between Victor's former friends and Rachel's acquaintances.⁸ These differences also contribute to representing the class-biased treatment that children received in religious institutions and, ultimately, they were what drove Victor to seek refuge and oblivion in a different world.

Victor's old friends are "the lads I'd grown up with, who'd been in on the terror and crack of the Christian Brothers" (129). Among them he feels "almost at home" (129). Despite the fact that Victor believes he was the Head Brother's only abuse victim (206),⁹ certain details in the novel seem to indicate that there were other abuse victims in the school. For example, when Fitzpatrick asks Victor whether he has already told his new friends at Donnelly's about the abuse he suffered, he also adds that "the fucker got to all of us [...]. He went right through the fuckin' roll book" (187). Likewise, in a rather heart-rending passage, Victor lists the fates of some of his former classmates:

I couldn't go after my old friends. There'd been deaths, and I'd heard about a son's suicide, from my mother – I hadn't gone to the funeral. There'd been depression, alcoholism. There'd been bailiffs. There'd been successes too – there was a daughter lecturing in Harvard or Princeton. There'd been a Lotto win. There'd been divorces, a car crash, cancer, Parkinson's, strokes. (145)

These seemingly arbitrary fates, which could spring from many different causes, take on a different meaning when compared to some of the long-term effects of childhood sexual abuse. In an article concerning such effects, Melissa Hall and Joshua Hall list, among several others, depression, stress, anxiety, "difficulty in establishing interpersonal relationships" as well as suicidal ideation (3). Judith Cashmore and Rita Shackel similarly refer to substance abuse (including alcohol) as well as aggressive behaviour and conduct problems (8). Therefore, the depression, the alcoholism, the bailiffs, the divorces and even the deaths (possibly even undisclosed suicides) contribute to reinforcing the suspicion that some of Victor's classmates were victims of sexual abuse, just like himself.

In radical contrast to this, Rachel's friends seem to have had very little contact with "the terror and crack of the Christian Brothers" (129), to use Victor's words. Victor is an

outsider in their world, and they are quick to ascertain this as soon as they ask him about his school:

–Which school did you go to, Victor?

Which? The possibilities were limited. There were only five or six schools I could have gone to, if I was one of them. The women always knew before the men: I wasn't one of them – they knew I was interesting. I'd come from another world, across the city. (162, original emphasis)

The name of the Christian Brothers per se does not seem to provoke any particular reaction in the listeners: Victor says that “I might as well have told them I'd gone to school up the Limpopo” (162). However, when he starts talking about his experiences at that school, he finds that “if we were at the table, all other chat would stop and they'd listened appalled, delighted, spellbound” (162). These characters' ignorance of what actually took place at Christian Brotherhood Schools is also what leads some of them to doubt Victor's account, as suggested by the scene already referred to earlier in this discussion:

–Did anything like this ever happen to any of us? he [one of the listeners] asked.

Us.

Most of them shook their heads,

[...]

–The nuns were lovely. (163-4, original emphasis)

In my view, the emphasis on the word “us” signifies to Victor the clear distinction between the speakers' world and Victor's world; it marks the difference between his experience in life and that of the others in the group: Victor is an outsider, he is different, because he went to a Christian Brotherhood School as a direct consequence of belonging to a different part of the city and, most especially, to a different social class (the two things, of course, essentially being related). The remark about the nuns, spoken by one of the women in the group, also refers to a class distinction that can be traced to real-life situations. It is the fact, which Raftery and O'Sullivan point out, that “the *real* orphanages run by religious orders mostly charged fees and catered for ‘the children of the middle-classes who had fallen on hard times’” (cited in Pierse 211, original emphasis). Pierse argues that “these institutions [the orphanages for middle-class people] – which were sharply distinguished from the industrial-school sector in practice, if not in the popular imagery – served a specific purpose in *maintaining a rigid class divide* between children from different backgrounds” (211, cited in Pierse, original emphasis). This “rigid class divide” comes to light in Victor's conversations with “Rachel's friends” and, as mentioned before, I believe that it is what pushes Victor to attempt to escape his past by escaping his class.

Conclusions

The principal aim of this discussion has been to argue that *Smile* exposes the role of a conservative society, heavily influenced by the Catholic Church, in failing to protect Victor (and, by extension, other children) from institutional abuse as well as in frustrating his chances of enjoying a happy, ordinary life. This denunciation is developed by presenting a society that functions under a moral regime established during the Victorian era and that, therefore, upholds a highly conservative attitude towards sexuality. This attitude consists of treating any topic related to sex as a taboo and of chastising anybody who dares to break this taboo or act in any manner considered immoral. Likewise, the undisputed status that the

Catholic Church holds, together with its persistent power are represented as key elements in conditioning the social resistance (slight if any at all) to its impositions. *Smile* shows how this combination of circumstances enables Victor's abuse to take place. As a child coming from a poor background, Victor depends on the Christian Brothers for the chance to receive a secondary education and, once he starts going to St Martin's, he finds that he must submit to the Brothers' unquestioned and even normalised brutal methods. The Head Brother, aware of Victor's difficult situation, and knowing himself safe, takes advantage of his position of power to abuse Victor. When, as an adult, Victor tries to understand what had happened to him and to disclose the truth, he finds that the society around him is not prepared for such a disclosure and is seemingly unwilling to accept the implications of Victor's story: that they live by the strict moral teachings of an institution capable of the most terrible crimes. Eventually, faced with the disbelief, blame and indifference with which his story is met, Victor's inchoate healing process is completely undermined.

A further aim in this discussion was to draw attention to the manner in which *Smile* emphasises how the abuse that Victor suffered is directly linked to his social class (as happened to be the case in real-life situations of institutional abuse). In *Smile*, this social dimension is partly reflected through the contrast between Victor's fragile economic situation and the economic prosperity of the Christian Brothers, but mainly and most tellingly in those characters who belong to higher social classes through their total ignorance of what really occurred in the Christian Brothers' Schools. In a way, Victor seems to believe that walking away from his childhood world, including his class, is the only way of leaving behind the elements that conditioned him for the abuse he suffered and, hence, of escaping his terrible past. Quite significantly, he only starts to remember once he returns to his childhood neighbourhood (which is how the novel begins). By exploring this aspect of working-class lives and through exposing the deviance of several members of the Catholic Church, Roddy Doyle can be counted among the writers who, according to Michael Pierse, set out to criticise the conservatism in Irish society through a clear denouncement of its "repressed sexual monsters" (194).

There are several further conclusions that I draw from my analysis. The first and most obvious is that *Smile* emphasises the need to remember the past, not only at an individual level, but as a society. Not only does *Smile* show how Victor will not be able to start healing unless he remembers the past, but it continually highlights the importance of society's need to remember and acknowledge the existence of certain dark elements in its core in order to be able to evolve. This might imply revising the role of particular historic institutions, such as the Catholic Church, and their influence in society, in order to determine whether they should continue to hold the same amount of power as they did in the past and whether their tenets, based on an old-fashioned moral framework, should still be held up as a model to follow and imitate. Furthermore, although the reader never knows whether Victor will eventually be able to heal himself of this trauma (the narrative ends with him broken and in tears), the novel's entire structure is focussed on showing the consequences of trying to forget the past in order to suppress a terrible truth. In the case of Victor, this process involves practically erasing his identity. However, in its denunciation of the destructive conservatism present in Dublin society, *Smile* also reinforces the notion that, as a society, we must not look away from the crimes committed within the boundaries of our community nor leave them, unacknowledged, in the past. As I see it, *Smile* indicates that this society must make the effort to directly face the monsters that it has created in order to then restore a sense of dignity to its victims.

The other conclusion is that, due to its links with real-life cases of institutional abuse in Ireland, the novel is a reminder of how important it is to take into account a people's diverse and distinct narratives when constructing a nation's official discourse. By having Victor tell his story, *Smile* recuperates the voice of a marginal character and reveals how his

experience in life differs completely from that of the characters belonging to higher social classes. As I have argued through my secondary sources, this was the actual case in Ireland, as most of the victims that suffered abuse in Catholic institutions were children from the lowest classes. For a long time, the voices of these children were ignored, precisely because they belonged to a marginal sector; they simply did not matter. By reclaiming Victor's voice and through telling his story, I believe that *Smile* clearly points to the necessity of listening to all members in society (not simply those of the privileged) to guarantee a full understanding of its history and, therefore, a more just future for everyone.

With *Smile*, Roddy Doyle has once again fulfilled the extraordinary task of amplifying the voice of the most vulnerable members of Dublin society, raising awareness of the disparity of experiences that conform a nation's history. Although not all readers might be satisfied with the ending of *Smile*, and indeed some might find it inferior to its most similar work, *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, Doyle has unquestionably thrown emotional light onto one of the darkest episodes in modern Irish history.

Notes

¹ It is noteworthy that the case discussed here holds many similarities with those of women who were locked away from society in Magdalene Laundries. Not only did these women have to endure psychological, physical and sexual abuse, but their incarceration was also the result of a complicity among the Church, the State and the families, as well as society in general to a certain extent. For examples of recent work in this issue, see María-Cinta Ramblado-Minero and Auxiliadora Pérez-Vides, who have edited and produced relevant material on this issue.

² Although no specific disease is mentioned in *Smile*, the hint at the possibility of Aileen wearing a wig seems to point towards cancer. Cancer is an element present in most of Doyle's fiction: not only do some of his main characters suffer from it – several examples can be found in *The Guts* (2013), *Paula Spencer* (2006) and *Bullfighting* (2011) – but it is often mentioned in relation to old friends, acquaintances or neighbours who have died from it. In Doyle's fiction, cancer is often discussed with the naturalness of any element that constitutes part of everyday life.

³ Colm O'Gorman is the Executive Director of Amnesty International Ireland, founder of One in Four and author of *Beyond Belief: Abused by his Priest. Betrayed by his Church. The Story of the Boy who Sued the Pope* (2009).

⁴ This confession is actually verbalised by Fitzpatrick, but, since the two characters turn out to be the same person, I choose to read this moment as Victor's own realization and, therefore, his own monologue.

⁵ Citing Crowley and Seery, 2001; Deering and Mellor, 2011; Denov, 2003; Dorahy and Clearwater, 2012; and Draucker and Martsolf, 2008.

⁶ Personal correspondence with the author. I take this opportunity to thank Dr Fernández for his insight.

⁷ The texts in question are Christy Brown's *Down All the Days* (1970) and Dermot Bolger's *The Journey Home* (1990).

⁸ I take these acquaintances to be any group of people belonging to a higher social class that Victor could have met, even without Rachel's influence.

⁹ Although Fitzpatrick qualifies this by saying: "...in *that* school. The only one. Before they moved him on to the next school" (*Smile*, 206, my emphasis).

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