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## Irish Girlhood and Female Sexuality in Claire Hennessy's *Like Other Girls*

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**Abstract.** In recent years, the success of Irish female authors and the increase of Irish Young Adult literature publications have contributed to a wider recognition of narratives of girlhood. Such is the case of Claire Hennessy's YA fiction novel *Like Other Girls*, which focuses on the experiences of sixteen-year-old Lauren Carroll as she navigates being a queer young female in contemporary Ireland and deals with having an abortion in the pre-Repeal Republic. This article analyses *Like Other Girls* focusing on three key aspects depicted in the novel: female body and sexuality, the concept of an LGBTQ+ group as a support network for queer youth, and the experience of abortion in pre-Repeal Ireland. Such analysis is carried out with the objective of giving recognition of Irish girlhood, as well as acknowledging the importance of narratives where the female body, diverse sexualities and those concerns involved in growing up female in contemporary Ireland are depicted so that young girls can find a space to identify themselves.

**Key Words.** Irish YA literature, Irish girlhood, sexuality, abortion, LGBTQ+ youth.

**Resumen.** En los últimos años, el éxito de autoras irlandesas y el incremento de publicaciones de literatura juvenil irlandesa han contribuido a un mayor reconocimiento de las narrativas sobre la juventud femenina. Este es el caso de la novela de ficción de Claire Hennessy *Like Other Girls*, la cual se centra en las experiencias de la joven de dieciséis años Lauren Carroll mientras navega lo que es ser una joven no heterosexual en la Irlanda contemporánea y se enfrenta a un aborto en una República donde era ilegal. Este artículo analiza *Like Other Girls* centrándose en tres aspectos clave representados en la novela: el cuerpo y la sexualidad femenina, el concepto de un grupo LGBTQ+ como red de apoyo, y la experiencia de tener un aborto. Este análisis tiene el objetivo tanto de poner en valor las experiencias de la juventud femenina irlandesa, como de reconocer la importancia de aquellas narrativas donde el cuerpo femenino, la diversidad de las sexualidades y aquellas inquietudes relacionadas con el crecimiento de las mujeres en la Irlanda contemporánea son representadas de forma que las chicas jóvenes puedan encontrar un espacio en el que identificarse.

**Palabras clave.** Literatura juvenil irlandesa, juventud femenina irlandesa, sexualidad, aborto, juventud LGBTQ+.

## Introduction

Aided by the success of many female authors, Irish Young Adult – YA – literature has seen an increase in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland that has contributed to a broader visibility of adolescent girls (Cahill 2017: 161). Patricia Kennon has acknowledged that Irish literature has seen an expansion in women’s writing as well as an examination of those traditional depictions and regimes surrounding the histories, voices and experiences of women and girls in Irish culture, history and media:

Over the last decade, the elision of Irish girls, women, and women’s writing has been challenged and defied by increased visibility, publication, public discourse, and grassroots activism around women’s reproductive rights [...] the representation of women in Irish theatre [...] marriage equality, and systematic gender biases in literary, cultural, and political institutions. (2020: 132-33)

During the past decade, emerging successful women authors of YA literature have addressed uncomfortable but important matters in their works, regarding “power, abuse, trauma, misogyny, and historic as well as contemporary discriminations and violence against teenage girls and women in Ireland” (Kennon 2020: 135). A very well-known example is Louise O’Neill’s 2015 novel *Asking For It*, which tackles victim blaming in rape culture. Moreover, this literary category has also shown “a slow but gradually increasing recognition and representation of queer identities and sexualities” particularly following the success of the 2015 same-sex marriage referendum (Kennon 2020: 139). This is demonstrated by the growing number of LGTBQ+ YA works by Irish authors that have been published over the past few years. Writers such as Moira Fowley-Doyle, Claire Hennessy, Adiba Jaigirdar, Ciara Smyth and Deirdre Sullivan, among others, have recently authored YA fiction novels that depict queer characters as protagonists and that explore a range of issues beyond the coming-out narrative that has often been characteristic of LGTBQ+ YA writings.

This recent literary recognition of and engagement with Irish girlhood in the post-Tiger era marks a significant shift from past narratives. In Irish literature, there had been a long-established proclivity to overlook those experiences of adolescent girls (Cahill 2017: 156). This disregard of Irish girlhood was quite opposite to the case of Irish boyhood, which was perceived as “a well-established literary genre of its own” (Dougherty 2007: 50). Kelly J.S. McGovern points out “that the writing of a female Irish child’s development entail[ed] deviating from what [was] generally recognized as Irish literary tradition” (2009: 245) as well as that the representation of “Irish girlhood as the experiences particular to life as a prepubescent female in Ireland [was] complicated by issues of illegibility within predominant systems of signification favorable to male conditions” (2009: 246-47). Furthermore, Susan Cahill emphasizes that in twentieth-century Irish literature, adolescent girls were frequently placed in anxious spaces characterized by situations of trauma and crisis, as well as they were “lacking protection, subject to invasion” (2017: 156-57).

Therefore, the current success of Irish female authors and YA publications marks a break from this tendency of ignoring narratives of girlhood that was characteristic of Irish literature in the past. It is, then, significant to recognise the works of these authors and how they acknowledge and represent Irish girlhood. Thus, this article aims to contribute to the visibility of the Irish adolescent girl through the analysis of Claire Hennessy’s YA fiction novel *Like Other Girls*. Such analysis has the following objectives: to provide recognition of Irish girlhood; to depict those concerns involved in growing up female in contemporary Ireland; and to acknowledge the importance of narratives where the female body and diverse sexualities are portrayed so that young girls can find a space to identify themselves. In order to do so, the

article will explore some of the matters addressed in the novel, focusing especially on the representation of female body and sexuality, on the protagonist's LGBTQ+ group of friends as a support network, and on her experience of accessing abortion in a pre-Repeal Ireland.

### ***Like Other Girls***

Written by Irish author Claire Hennessy, *Like Other Girls* is a YA fiction novel published in 2017. Hennessy, who has authored a number of contemporary YA novels, examines why the young adult genre is appealing for both readers and writers: “from a writers’ perspective, adolescence is a fascinating time – it’s so intense, it’s a time of figuring things out, and there’s a lot of in-built conflict already [...] The characters might be young but the emotional truths are the core ones that we carry into adulthood” (qtd. in Redmond n.d.: paragraph 9).

In *Like Other Girls*, Lauren Carroll is a sixteen-year-old queer girl from Dublin who finds herself confronting a variety of situations as she begins her Transition Year in school: her best friend is changing in a way Lauren cannot understand at first, so they fight and end up not speaking to each other; her boyfriend seems to be more interested in sex than in Lauren as a person, and cannot even stand up to his friends when they are disrespectful to her; and her relationship with her mother has become tense since she took a job as the principal of her school. Many of these issues – falling out with friends, fighting with boyfriends, strained relationships with family members – are not precisely uncommon for most teenagers. However, Lauren is suddenly faced with a more complicated problem: she is pregnant. On top of everything else, finding out about the pregnancy only makes matters worse for Lauren. She decides to have an abortion but does not ask anyone for help nor support – even though it is what she wants, it seems that she cannot bring herself to ask. The problems with her best friend, boyfriend and mother only grow more complicated as Lauren deals with the news of the pregnancy and turns to alcohol as a source of comfort. It is significant to note that this story is not a real testimony, but a literary account, and told from Lauren’s perspective the novel resembles the coming-of-age narrative model that is characteristic of YA fiction.

As can be observed, *Like Other Girls* tackles a variety of issues based on the experiences of Lauren. The different situations where the protagonist finds herself give an insight into Irish girlhood and into aspects that can be of interest for Irish youth, as they might be familiar with or intrigued by some of the events in Lauren’s life. The analysis that follows reflects on some of these matters.

### **Female body and sexuality**

In her study of body image and female sexuality in YA literature, Beth Younger argues that YA fiction offers a special literary space that exposes the cultural distress surrounding young female bodies (2009: xvi) since it “provides multitudinous representations of young girls as sexual beings and reflects the social anxiety about controlling these bodies” (2009: 2). In *Like Other Girls*, Lauren’s social anxieties are reflected in the pressure around her to conform to the stereotypical patterns of appearance and behaviour that young girls are expected to follow as well as in her conflicts with her body and how it is perceived in contemporary society. She speaks about her experiences as a cis non-straight adolescent girl and about how she feels towards her body. For instance, she is very clear about her conflict with periods and how she is affected by this bodily function:

I have felt trapped in my body since I was ten years old and discovered that [...] periods were neither magical nor one-off things that happened to turn you into a woman. Every month. Every month for decades. For most of your life. The pain, the blood, the life-on-

hold. The being told to get on with things because it's natural. Normal. Part of being a girl. (Hennessy 2017: 135)

When she spends time with her boyfriend – who sometimes feels more preoccupied with having sex than listening to his girlfriend – she feels “like a body. Not Lauren. Just a girl-body to be touched” (Hennessy 2017: 8). Lauren is confused by this situation, as she feels “a terrible person” but at the same time wonders “since when did going over to your boyfriend's house constitute a binding contract about shenanigans?” and wishes that Justin could remember that she is “an actual person and not just a vagina” (Hennessy 2017: 9). This confusion of feelings is further complicated by the implications of her period: “Is it always going to be like this – never being quite sure whether it's okay to be annoyed or whether you really are just, well, a crazy girl?” (Hennessy 2017: 22). This depiction of herself as a “crazy girl” due to what is happening in her body is strengthened by the fact that Justin easily pretends everything is alright as soon as Lauren apologises for the “[b]leedy time of doom & pain & much insanity” (Hennessy 2017: 24, original emphasis). Even if Justin might not have been a great boyfriend, he can simply let Lauren believe that she was indeed being “crazy” because of her period and therefore he would no longer be at fault.

The novel also focuses on the female body and its position within a patriarchal society, as Lauren struggles with her feelings concerning her body and with her unplanned pregnancy. This conflict with her own body becomes further aggravated when the school decides that some girls will dress as boys for the school musical. Lauren feels she “can't pretend to be anything other than this fleshy cage with breasts and a womb and a vagina and everything that goes with that” (Hennessy 2017: 212). However, she does wish she could indeed pretend even beyond the boundaries of the play: “And oh, don't think I don't know how much easier it would be if I really was the boy I'm pretending to be, that uncomplicated default human. Not needing to think and worry about my body in the same way. Not having bits of my body be the subject of national debate” (Hennessy 2017: 212). It is precisely the fact that boys do not have to experience the same problems in relation to their bodies that upsets Lauren, who finds herself fighting a battle she has not chosen: “They genuinely don't understand, they can't understand, what it means to live in this body. This body with its space to let men in. This body with its space to grow a new life, whether you want it or not. This body that has things done to it” (Hennessy 2017: 228). It is significant to note how Lauren's cultural context influences her perception of her own body, as in the past in Ireland the sexuality of women and the female body had been regarded “a source of sin” (Ryan 2010: 94) and in national narratives the girl's body had been fixed “in a reproductive function” (Cahill 2016: 222). This is, while women were reduced to their role of reproduction, they were also expected to attend to those moral values that posited the immaculate Virgin Mary as an icon for women to emulate.

Furthermore, postfeminist discourses where an obsessive concern about the body predominates (see Gill 2007) have had a strong impact on Lauren's awareness of her body. For instance, the fact that she has been cast to play a boy in the school musical complicates even more her idea that she cannot be the “Perfect Young Lady” (Hennessy 2017: 64-65) that she feels her school – and society at large – is asking her to be. She does not feel the same as the girls from her school, as if they had “received some sort of manual for how to be a girl that never arrived in my letterbox” (Hennessy 2017: 51). When she finds out about her role in the play she thinks it is because “[t]his is what happens when you don't spend all your time researching how to do your make-up in such a way that makes you look beautiful but also makes you look sufficiently 'natural' [...] If you want to be believed as a girl on stage, that's what you need to do” (Hennessy 2017: 58). She even feels embarrassed to tell Justin in case “it will make him interrogate his relationship with me, and wonder if it's because my legs are too hairy or if

my jaw is too square” (Hennessy 2017: 58). Pressures on body image are manifested in Lauren’s concerns regarding her appearance and how others – the school, her boyfriend – perceive her.

The relation between Lauren and her body also plays a crucial part in the fight between her and her best friend, who is transitioning to male. Lauren used to have a crush on her best friend, and even though they were not in a relationship there was “occasional kissing, just silly, no big deal” (Hennessy 2017: 100). The relationship evolves to the point that they sleep together, but Lauren’s best friend seems to become nervous at some point and asks her to stop – which Lauren does. It is after this episode – and after a long time of hearing no word from him – that Lauren finds out about his transition and feels that it was her body that had freaked him out and that she has lost her best friend. It is not until the two friends talk, hear each other’s experiences and share how they feel towards their bodies, that they become friends again. Though during the time of their fight, Lauren does show some transphobic attitudes, these are frequently rebuked by her friends. What Hennessy’s novel does is to raise awareness of the issue of transphobia among youth, depicting Lauren as a flawed character who is conditioned by the power structures of gender that are entrenched in society. Therefore, her attitudes are not justified, they are identified so that both Lauren and readers can understand where they come from and how they are troubled and need to be deconstructed.

To conclude this section, the novel does not only deal with the female body but it also explores the theme of sexuality. It is worth noting that contrary to many YA novels of the past that generally portrayed male sexual desire as natural and oftentimes out of control – but normal – and female sexual desire as abnormal and even dangerous (Younger 2009: 23), Lauren is depicted as a girl who enjoys her sexuality. She admits that she “can’t stop thinking about sex” (Hennessy 2017: 42) and also speaks openly about masturbation, both as a form of self-pleasuring (Hennessy 2017: 27) and with regard to “the cramp-helping qualities of orgasms” (Hennessy 2017: 180).

Lauren is attracted to both girls and boys, although she has not chosen any term to identify with. She claims she does not like the word bisexual because “[i]t sounds like you need to have two partners on the go at all times to satisfy your needs” (Hennessy 2017: 61). While this might be read as a form of biphobia, it can also be understood precisely as the result of the prevalence of inaccurate stereotypes that have characterised the representation of bisexual people in literature and other media. For instance, in their study of LGBTQ+ representation in YA literature, Christine A. Jenkins and Michael Cart state that “the notion that being bisexual is selfish is one that recurs in the literature” (2018: 154). Misconceptions such as that bisexuals are unfaithful or that they are simply going through a phase on their way to homosexuality might have been some of the reasons behind Lauren’s avoidance of this term. This can thus be seen as another example of how Lauren is indeed a flawed character who has been heavily influenced by the culture that surrounds her.

Coming out is much depicted for adolescents “as an intense period of sexual attraction, social rebellion, and personal growth” (Kidd 1998: 114), and even though that can be the case, in *Like Other Girls* it is not portrayed as the main event of the novel, nor as a big deal. Lauren’s coming out to her mother is indeed quite simple: “[I] said I might end up marrying a woman [...] and Mum looked at me and went ‘really?’ and I said ‘yeah’ and she said ‘okay’ and that was it” (Hennessy 2017: 81). In fact, Lauren and her best friend discuss “how weird it is to be expected to ‘come out’, which is basically going ‘hey, here’s who I want to have sex with’. Is that ever a conversation anyone wants to have with their parents? And you only have to do it if you’re not straight” (Hennessy 2017: 149). Whether coming out may not necessarily be reduced to announcing who someone wants to sleep with, the two friends do make a great point about only non-heterosexual people having to go through this process. Moreover, this is a great example that, even though coming out can indeed be a big deal, *all* stories of LGBTQ+ characters do not necessarily need to be reduced to this narrative. I would argue that it is

significant to acknowledge that queer people do not only explore how to come out, but have more experiences both concerning their sexuality and also beyond this. As William P. Banks explains, if texts with LGBTQ+ characters come down to the struggle of ‘dealing with’ their sexualities and everything this encompasses (i.e., fear of reaction from parents, conflicts with others, etc.), there is a reductive suggestion that the experiences of said characters fall solely upon these personal conflicts (2009: 35). While the depiction of these issues is important because it reflects the experiences of many, I agree with Banks that LGBTQ+ narratives should not be reduced to this, and rather should be varied and explore a range of topics that need not be connected to a character’s sexuality.

Furthermore, as Lauren navigates being a non-straight teenage girl, it is possible to observe how she deals with different situations: the “fine line” between wanting to be her teacher when she grows up or actually having a crush on her (Hennessy 2017: 31); the awkward moment of seeming “an Evil Lesbian Predator” when looking at another girl getting changed in the bathroom (Hennessy 2017: 41); or the stage when she thinks that she might be developing a crush on a straight girl (Hennessy 2017: 114). In reading about Lauren’s experiences, queer youth could identify with some of these, and therefore they would not only see themselves reflected in the narrative but might even feel understood.

### **LGBTQ+ friendships as a support network**

In line with what has been mentioned in the previous section, although Lauren’s sexuality is not the main theme of the novel, it does play a part in her life experiences. Lauren attends an all-girls Catholic school, what she had hoped would have been “all jolly japes and tricks on the teachers and passionate friendships and faintly queer overtones” but turns out she thinks that “the closest any of them [girls at the school] have come to queerness is one of those showing-off-for-the-boys kisses” (Hennessy 2017: 1-5).

Luckily, Lauren has found a place where she feels that she belongs, Q Club, which she describes as the place “to go for feminist rantings or getting to talk about the messed-up-ness of being presumed straight until proven otherwise” (Hennessy 2017: 10). For Lauren “Q Club is where my friends are. My real friends” (Hennessy 2017: 10). She had joined the club with her best friend before he had begun his transition, and although at first Lauren had thought that this idea of support group seemed “a bit cringy” (Hennessy 2017: 45), it turned out to be where both friends had “found their people” (Hennessy 2017: 85).

Q Club is depicted as a quite diverse group, a place for all young people who identify as LGBTQ+. Moreover, because there “is some kind of official policy about not outing people in Q Club to others” (Hennessy 2017: 103), this group becomes a place of freedom and of being oneself, an option that might not be available elsewhere for some of its members. For Lauren, these are “people who get it – who do things like write poems about being gay or feeling like they’re in the wrong body and about how much it sucks when the world is shitty about it”, and spending time with them has given both her and her best friend “an extra aura of confidence” (Hennessy 2017: 99).

However, there are moments when Lauren feels she might not belong to Q Club as much. For instance, when she is struggling with her best friend’s transition, she wonders: “Maybe I shouldn’t even be here. I have a boyfriend [...] I am a cis girl [...] You only get sympathy here if you are defining yourself as something else” (Hennessy 2017: 82-83). As mentioned above, Lauren’s initial reaction to her best friend’s transition leads to arguments with some of her friends, and as she remains unable to ask for help regarding her abortion and keeps relying on alcohol, she convinces herself that she does not “need anyone from Q Club any more” (Hennessy 2017: 219). It is not until she finally goes to counselling and is able to talk about the abortion that things start to get better and she makes up with her best friend and

everyone else in their LGBTQ+ group. What is more, she has even gained some new friends along the way, as some of those girls from school that Lauren thought were “idiots” (Hennessy 2017: 1) turn out to be quite the opposite of what she had expected, and some even join Q Club.

This process has been one of learning for Lauren, who concludes: “It is funny and also sort of inspiring to see what happens when you actually tell people what’s been going on in your life, instead of just expecting them to be psychic. I feel taken-care-of by my friends in a way I thought you needed a romantic (okay, sex) partner for” (Hennessy 2017: 278-79).

### **Teenage pregnancy and abortion**

In order to understand how the topic of abortion is depicted in the novel, it is important to situate it within the Irish context. Abortion in Ireland had been illegal under the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act, a piece from British legislation that had been undertaken by the Irish Free State since independence in 1922 (Barry 1988: 58). After contraception was – restrictively – legalised in 1980 (Barry 1988: 57), a referendum was held in 1983, which resulted in the Eighth Amendment being added to the Constitution of the Republic of Ireland. This Amendment effectively prohibited abortion (Side 2020: 16).

It was not until almost a decade later, in 1992, as an outcome of the X case, that a referendum regarding abortion would be held again in Ireland (see Smyth 1993). With a bigger voting turnout than in 1983, this referendum resulted in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments being added to the Constitution, which provided rights to travel abroad for an abortion and to obtain information regarding this procedure, respectively (Muldowney 2015: 137). Twenty years later, the death of Savita Halappanavar – from septicaemia and E. coli at seventeen-weeks pregnant after she had been refused termination on the grounds that there was still a foetal heartbeat and that Ireland is a Catholic nation (see Lentin 2013) – resulted in a political debate that tackled the ambiguity of the law, and in 2014 it was clarified that abortion was indeed allowed “when the life of the woman is at risk, including the risk of a suicide” (Mishtal 2017: 192). The previous year, the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act 2013 had been passed, which set out “how women could exercise the limited right to access life-saving abortion” (de Londras 2020: 36).

Lastly, in May 2018 a referendum to remove the Eighth Amendment from the Constitution was held. A 66.9 per cent of voters were in favour of removing said amendment, and therefore, abortion has been legally available in the country since January 2019 – in those circumstances laid out by the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 (Side 2020: 16-17).

Certainly, there were many other events that marked the history of the fight for reproductive rights in Ireland, such as the death of Ann Lovett and the scandal of the Kerry babies in 1984; the *C Case*; the 2002 referendum; *A, B and C v Ireland*; and several cases regarding fatal foetal abnormality; among others. However, due to the extension of the article, only some of the key events have been mentioned here in order to provide some context that would be helpful in understanding the following analysis of Hennessy’s novel.

*Like Other Girls* takes place before the Eighth Amendment had been repealed, and consequently this affects Lauren’s experience as she goes through an abortion. In the ‘Acknowledgements’ section, Claire Hennessy explains that when she began writing the book she was hoping “that it would already be ‘historical fiction’ by the time it was published. As of spring 2017, however, it is still illegal to obtain an abortion in Ireland unless you are literally dying on a hospital bed, in which case a panel of doctors might agree to provide the procedure.

If you're lucky" (2017: 281)<sup>1</sup>. However, although abortion is no longer illegal in Ireland, the narrative for reproductive rights in the Republic cannot be summarised in the repealing of the Eighth Amendment, as it can be seen that this has been a fight that dates *at least* back to the 1980s. Indeed, the experiences of Irish women and girls seeking an abortion today would not be the same as Lauren's, yet hers also differ from those who had to go through the process forty or thirty years before. But the events that took place from the eighties until now have indeed helped shape the ideas regarding abortion that were ingrained in Irish society and that therefore condition, in part, Lauren's response to her pregnancy and to the challenges she encounters.

As has previously been mentioned, Lauren attends an all-girls Catholic school, St Agnes, who was "[v]irgin martyr. Patron saint of chastity" (Hennessy 2017: 29). As a Catholic school, students attend a Christmas Mass before the holidays, and it is during said visit to the church that Lauren first realises she might be pregnant: "And doesn't it make sense that I am sitting in the most holy of places when fear slices through me?" (Hennessy 2017: 119). Even though Lauren has practiced safe sex using protection, she finds herself dealing with an unplanned pregnancy and consequently enters a cycle of numbing herself through binge-drinking and searching the internet for as much information as she can gather on abortion. She decides to go "to one of those crisis-pregnancy places, the kind that get advertised on the backs of bathroom doors in shopping centres and at the side of your screen as soon as you start searching for pregnancy-themed topics" (Hennessy 2017: 129-30). When she gets to the place, the first thing she notices is that most women there are foreign (Hennessy 2017: 130). As Lauren goes in to talk to the counsellor, the woman gives her some brochures about adoption services and support from extended family, but Lauren is certain about what information she is looking for. She asks about abortion – aware that it cannot be performed in Ireland – and the counsellor hands her another brochure, but "[t]his one is not glossy. It is flimsy. There is a foetus on the front cover. Like, recognisably one. Almost a baby. You can make out fingers and toes. A large-headed creature curled up in the womb" (Hennessy 2017: 131). But it is when the woman mentions that after seven weeks it would not be possible to have a medical abortion (Hennessy 2017: 132) that Lauren realises there is something wrong about this place, because it is "[n]ine weeks. Up to nine weeks. That's what the websites for the clinics say. The English clinics that have special pages for Irish women because they know. They know" (Hennessy 2017: 133). Lauren hurriedly leaves, and as she takes a picture of the counsellor and of the outside of the centre – that she will later send to journalists – she realises that outside on the window a newspaper piece reads "Abortion is Evil" and an actual Family Planning Clinic is right nearby (Hennessy 2017: 133-34).

When Lauren tells her friend Felicity she thinks she might be pregnant, Felicity offers to buy her a pregnancy test. As she waits for her to bring the test, she has a look at the brochures again, only to confirm her suspicion about the fake clinic. Lauren quickly grows more aware of the problem behind these clinics and the techniques they use to scare women away from abortion:

How is this fair? How the hell is this fair, to lie like this? What if, what if. I think of the hypothetical I always [...] give to Mrs O'Connor: what if you're a thirteen-year-old incest victim going to a place like that? What if you don't understand, what if you don't–

Holy fuck, it's only hitting me now, I mean, really hitting me. The other women there. Immigrants with wobbly English. Easier to lie to. Easier to scare. (Hennessy 2017: 139)

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<sup>1</sup> Hennessy also clarifies that the stated figure of Irish women travelling abroad to obtain abortions in a particular year is not real, but is within the range of women that travel annually in real life. Similarly, the names of organisations and campaigners that appear in the novel do not correspond to real ones either (2017: 281).

Despite not doing the test, Lauren tells Felicity that it is negative because “[w]hat if she thinks: *you can’t kill a child, you murderer?*” (Hennessy 2017: 141, original emphasis), and tells her friend to go for a drink. It is drinking that becomes Lauren’s escape mechanism to avoid thinking about the pregnancy: “I push the thoughts away. To the distant place that beer can push them to” (Hennessy 2017: 142). Moreover, Lauren also subconsciously hopes that drinking “will take care of it [the pregnancy] so I don’t have to make that trip next week. Maybe this will solve everything” (Hennessy 2017: 169).

The whole situation makes Lauren realise how unaware she is of the circumstances faced by those people who find themselves trying to access abortion in Ireland: “Legal to travel. Not legal to have here. Fourteen years in prison. Can they lock you up here if they find out, even if it happens abroad? I should know this and don’t. Didn’t even occur to me to search for it. It sounds barbaric” (Hennessy 2017: 141).

Gathering money from her Christmas presents, using “[e]very single bit of my savings that I was going to use to buy clothes or books or sweets or the kind of things normal teenage girls buy” (Hennessy 2017: 227) and her mother’s credit card, Lauren travels to an abortion clinic in Liverpool, not having told anyone about it and pretending that she is going to Cork for the day with her friends from Q club. She has not stopped searching the internet for information: “there’s between ten and twelve of us a day, making this journey. [...] The chances of someone else being on this flight are not unreasonably slim. Or at least someone else being in the airport right now” (Hennessy 2017: 172). Indeed, she meets other Irish women at the clinic. When she arrives to Liverpool and gets a taxi, she can tell the driver recognises the place where she is going and expects him to tell her that she is “a tramp, a slut, a whore, a murderer”, but instead, all he says is “God love ya” (Hennessy 2017: 175). Once the procedure is done and before heading back to the airport, Lauren cannot but wonder: “‘Why the – why the fucking *fuck* am I not in a clinic in Dublin right now?’ A bus ride away from my bed instead of a sea away?” and “‘What medieval backwater am I heading back to?’” (Hennessy 2017: 180-81, original emphasis).

Nevertheless, just because the procedure has been done, does not mean that Lauren will be just fine. The drinking gets worse, to the point that she blacks out and cannot remember what she has done. Furthermore, Lauren also feels guilty about not having the abortion for “the *right* reasons” (Hennessy 2017: 182, original emphasis) and about not feeling regretful, as for her it was “a really easy choice to make” (Hennessy 2017: 275).

Not long after having the abortion, Lauren realises that the information about the fake clinic that she had sent to several journalists had made it to the newspaper. At the same time as she hopes no one will find out that it is her who went to this clinic, she needs someone to bring it up, someone to ask her, so that she can say it: “I should feel proud or brave or something, but all I can think is: what if someone figures it out? And then I think: what if no one does?” (Hennessy 2017: 199). As Lauren and her father listen to the debate on abortion being broadcasted on the radio, she pleads – in her head – for him to say something: “Say *more*, Dad. Say how horrible it must be to have an unwanted pregnancy in this country. Say how sympathetic you are. I need you to spell it out for me. Say how if it was me who’d gone to a clinic like that, who’d been lied to like that, you’d be raging. You wouldn’t judge me. You’d still love me. *Say it*” (Hennessy 2017: 208, original emphasis). As her family and friends do not seem to realise what has happened to Lauren and she still cannot bring herself to say it, the drinking and the obsessive internet research on abortion-related information get worse.

Finally, Lauren’s parents, worried about her drinking and her lately angrier behaviour, decide to send her to a counsellor. It is there that she is finally able to bring herself to say the words “I had an abortion” and share her feelings towards it: “I want to set this fucking country on fire” (Hennessy 2017: 251). Once Lauren has at last let this out, she slowly starts feeling better: she stops binge-drinking, she is able to tell her friends, and even her mother, who she had expected to know what had happened all this time. It is then that Lauren also realises:

Oh God. What did I expect, really – some TV mother who would immediately know that I was keeping a secret from her, some kind of female intuition tipping her off, while good ol’ Dad was allowed to be blissfully ignorant of it all? Both my parents work long hours at demanding jobs. And I told them nothing. Nothing at all.

I kept it a secret while all the time hoping – expecting – a little extra patience from people. A little extra comfort. (Hennessy 2017: 273)

At the end of the novel, Lauren contacts the journalist who had published her story, because she had “read so many nasty comments about how the ‘anonymous girl’ was clearly completely invented” (Hennessy 2017: 279). Even though she has been asked to give a speech, she thinks it would be “too easy to dismiss a teenage girl” as she has already been getting plenty hate-mail from people and other messages that claim that she is too young to realise what she has done or that they will pray for her (Hennessy 2017: 280). Nevertheless, Lauren is finally relieved that she has been able to talk to her family and friends and has found the support she needed but had not known how to ask for.

## Conclusion

In his analysis of Irish YA literature, Pádraic Whyte acknowledges how those controversial experiences that are frequently marginalised have been brought into the mainstream by several Irish authors during the past few decades, and now “YA novels in Ireland represent a wide range of teenage experience, depicting varied forms of youth culture in contemporary Ireland” (2011: 80). Furthermore, Kennon notes how recent Irish YA literature has helped to push for the recognition of Irish girlhood and proclaim its importance (2020: 133). Though the early years of the genre were “slow to recognise or address subjects such as teenage pregnancy, the realities of female embodiment, reproductive freedoms, and institutional child abuse in past and contemporary Irish society” (Kennon 2020: 134), today it is possible to find some of these matters represented in works aimed at young readers. Hennessy’s *Like Other Girls* is an example. Though Lauren’s experiences are not common to every Irish teenage girl and hers is a fictional story, the novel offers readers an insight into the life of its adolescent protagonist and the distress she confronts in a society that is marked by pressure upon young girls to attain to certain patterns and behaviours regarding their body and sexuality. This essay has focused particularly on the novel’s depiction of abortion, LGBTQ+ support networks and the protagonist’s perception of her body. The analysis of these topics posits Lauren as an imperfect but relatable character who is subject to her social and cultural contexts. Her discomfort and struggles with her body and image reflect the discourses surrounding reproductive politics that prevailed in Ireland for many years and the postfeminist discourse that defines femininity “as a bodily property” (Gill 2007: 149), and these have an impact on Lauren’s responses to her abortion and to her best friend’s transition. Her reaction to her pregnancy is also marked by the Irish debate on reproductive rights, as she recognises the injustice of her situation but still fears that she might be perceived as a murderer or as a monster for not having any regrets about the abortion. Furthermore, regarding her sexuality, she appears to be influenced as well by those stereotypes that portray bisexuality as selfish or as a phase, as she does not seem to agree with what – she believes – being bisexual entails and as she questions both her belonging among the girls from her school and among her queer group of friends.

To conclude, Hennessy’s novel addresses a variety of issues that concern today’s youth, including their daily struggles and preoccupations with their bodies and sexual identities. Moreover, as the novel is told from the perspective of an adolescent girl and explores her particular conflicts as a young female in contemporary Ireland, Hennessy provides an approach

to Irish girlhood that both contributes to the recognition of these narratives and widens their scope. In reading *Like Other Girls*, it is possible to observe that Irish YA literature has much to offer in regards to its significance for Irish young readers, and thus it is hoped that the range of themes depicted in said literary category continue to increase in order to attend the needs and concerns of its readers and to expand the visibility of Irish girlhood and the diversity within it.

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