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## Change, Stasis and Celtic Tiger Ireland in the Short Stories of *There Are Little Kingdoms* (2007) by Kevin Barry

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**Abstract.** This essay focuses on Irish writer Kevin Barry's first collection of short stories, *There Are Little Kingdoms* (2007). The Ireland depicted in this work is the Ireland of the new millennium – a territory facing the transformations of Celtic Tiger prosperity. The analysis of these short stories, which provide several snapshots of contemporary Ireland, will explore how the Republic depicted in Barry's work is a territory in some ways bound to its rural past, often characterised by its short-sightedness despite pretensions of development. Changes are occurring, but at the same time stasis permeates the scenarios of the plots. The irony is salient, considering that the Celtic Tiger era is a time associated with prosperity and joy, yet the lives and stories of the characters of *There Are Little Kingdoms* (2007), as this essay will reveal, are downbeat.

**Key Words.** Celtic Tiger, Ireland, crisis, prosperity, the Irish short story.

**Resumen.** El presente ensayo se centra en la primera colección de relatos cortos *There Are Little Kingdoms* (2007) escrita por el autor irlandés, Kevin Barry. La Irlanda aquí retratada es la Irlanda del nuevo milenio, y está presenciando las transformaciones de la prosperidad del Tigre Celta. Con el análisis de esta colección, la cual proporciona varias instantáneas de la Irlanda contemporánea, se explorará como la República retratada en la obra de Barry sigue siendo un territorio atado de alguna forma a su pasado rural, caracterizado muchas veces por sus cortos puntos de mira, muy a pesar de las pretensiones de desarrollo. Los cambios están sucediendo, pero al mismo tiempo el estancamiento permea los escenarios de las tramas. La ironía es evidente si se considera que el periodo de bonanza económica se asocia con la prosperidad y con el júbilo, no obstante, las vidas y las historias de los personajes *There Are Little Kingdoms* (2007), tal y como se mostrará en este ensayo, son descorazonadoras.

**Palabras clave.** Celtic Tiger, Irlanda, crisis, prosperidad, el relato corto irlandés.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The present essay focuses on the work of one of the most sonorous voices of contemporary Ireland, the Limerick-born author Kevin Barry (1969–). Barry is a novelist and short-story writer with a solid reputation on both sides of the Atlantic. He is frequently described as a comic stylist who likes to poke around in dark corners, because he writes intensely dramatic stories that are tender and understated, as well as hilarious narratives that strike deep chords (Barry and Carman 2013). Despite the importance of the novel form, attention here will centre on Barry's first book of short fiction, *There Are Little Kingdoms* (2007), due to the relevance of this type of literary genre in the Irish context and in relation to the Celtic Tiger phenomenon at the turn of the new millennium.

Rooted in a solid tradition that places the short story at the very heart of the Irish literary canon (Ingman 2009), the past few decades have seen a prolific output in the form, not despite – but rather owing much to – the recent ascendancy of broadcast radio, television, and digital media, with the result that the short story in Ireland continues to hold a looking-glass to the changing faces of life (Malcolm and Malcolm 2008: 277). Interest in the short story in recent decades ranges from publishers and writers to readers and scholars, to the extent that some voices in the academic field assert that the form was undergoing a renaissance, but others disagree (Barry and Jones 2013; Forkner 2001: 152; Gilmartin 2015; Goodman 2015; Prospero 2018; Jordan 2015; Kilroy and Lozano García 2018). Standing at the very heart of the critique of what can be hyperbolically labelled as the short story's almost fruitless commitment to the intricacies of this period is the form's tendency to look to the past for inspiration (Armie 2019). Nevertheless, in the meantime – and paradoxically – “the short story, perhaps more than any other form, has been associated with modernity, both in terms of experimentation and theme” (Ingman 2009: 2), by presenting people's ever changing relationship to the world and to the place they inhabit (Alkareem Atteh 2021: 12). This is why it is frequently stated that “the short story encapsulates the essence of literary modernism, and has an enduring ability to capture the episodic nature of twentieth-century experience” (Head 1994: 1), as well as its causes and replicas.

In an interview, Barry (2018) spoke about this backward-looking tendency that characterises Irish literature. For him, the justification for this assertion comes from the fact that “Ireland, in effect, ‘skipped the twentieth century’ – it transformed itself from a poor, largely agricultural economy into a high-tech export-intensive powerhouse in less than a generation” (Prospero 2018). Ireland experienced the effects of the Celtic Tiger's transformations and the pace of change unevenly, as well as rapidly, with the result that some parts of Ireland appeared relatively undisturbed by the accelerated globalisation that has been so noticeable in cities like Dublin and Cork, whereas markedly an older Ireland lingered on and evoked nostalgia in many contexts (Allen and Regan 2008: 1). As this essay will reveal, both Irelands, old and new, are very much present and clash in their realistic and synchronous representations with change and stasis throughout the Celtic Tiger period in *There Are Little Kingdoms*. Consequently, beneath this masked retrospection of the short story in this time of the Celtic Tiger, there lies – as this paper also claims – Ireland's unfinished coming to terms with its capitalist and globalist facets.

This problematic and late renaissance of the short story fostered – only partially, of course – the success of *There Are Little Kingdoms*. The collection follows the Irish tradition of storytelling and mixes new themes – such as, for example, the effect of globalisation,

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destruction of the environment, or human loneliness in an aloof and frenzied world – with dark humour, historical references, realism and a touch of magic, to such an extent that “apart from an up-dating of language and behaviour, [the book] sits so squarely within the Irish short story tradition that it could have been written at any point during the past fifty years” (Ingman 2009: 260). Although the book contains thirteen pieces of short fiction, only the first eleven stories have been taken as the subject of analysis in the present research because they are set in Ireland. This essay, therefore, examines *There Are Little Kingdoms* (2007) through a lens informed by the state of the Republic and the situation of the Irish people during the period of the Celtic Tiger. Barry’s works are set at random intervals throughout a context that stretches from the birth of the Celtic Tiger economic phenomenon, at the beginning of the 1990s, until 2007, when the first glimpses of the impending global recession could already be seen.

These short stories, as the following pages will show, are consistent in their depictions of a disheartening reality. Snapshots of the characters’ realities reveal lives in small towns characterised by rank poverty, alcoholism, drug abuse and an acute sense of paralysis, as despite the changes taking place in this fictional world, transformations are often slow – when they occur at all. Due to space limitations, this analysis is obliged to leave many aspects of the individual stories unexplored, and the reasons for certain reactions of the protagonists are left uninterrogated. Nevertheless, this analysis aims to illustrate how Barry shines a spotlight on the existential unhappiness, frustration, violence, and misery of a handful of Irish people which are likely representative of the attitudes and situations of real Irish people. Characters struggle emotionally or physically with their lives, and profound feelings of displacement and dysfunctionality are seen in their broken and unhealthy relationships and actions.

My intention here, therefore, is to demonstrate how Kevin Barry’s collection spoke as the voice of Ireland’s conscience at this historic moment and how, through glimpses, he presents a tentative approach to the incompleteness of some of the country’s transformations by depicting clashes between opposing forces and their impact on the lives of these Irish characters in metamorphosed and at times unreal scenarios. In this way, it will become clear that the contemporary short story was not swept away with the total enthusiasm of the Celtic Tiger period, as the form was often able to perceive the reality behind the smokescreen of economic buoyancy and national optimism.

In order to establish a connection between this literary creation and the cultural, economic social, religious and political facets of Ireland during this period of prosperity, the present analysis will follow the theories of Fintan O’Toole presented in *The Lie of the Land* (1997) and *Ship of Fools* (2010). In these works, O’Toole stresses the wise choices as well as the mistakes made by the Irish throughout the process of this new becoming or “reinvention” (Kirby et al. 2002). Furthermore, both books reinforce previously introduced ideas of unfinished development by reflecting on the blurred distinction between old and new and on how the “extreme economic globalisation, low personal and corporate taxes, ‘business-friendly’ government and light regulation” (O’Toole 2010: 12) – to mention but a few aspects – sank the Irish economy and its people into desperation and misery after little more than a decade of affluence. It will be seen how O’Toole’s analysis of the country finds an uncanny parallel in these stories written by Barry.

In *There Are Little Kingdoms* (2007), “the characterization and tone of a contemporary update of Joyce’s *Dubliners*, however scattered across the midwestern and western cities and towns and villages of a jittery, weary, and off-kilter Irish present” (Murphy 2012), not only mirrors in many senses coetaneous reality by offering snapshots of a poignant and contradictory portrait of Celtic Tiger Ireland, but also anticipates, as will be demonstrated later, events and “themes that take five years or more to make their appearance in other genres” (Ingman 2009: 226). *There Are Little Kingdoms* hints at the economic recession that would affect the Republic from 2008 onwards, and this perceptiveness transforms the

collection into a harbinger of change and chaos, in a context where “[t]he rise and the fall of the Celtic Tiger was indeed a kind of moral tale, but the lesson was not that free-market globalisation is a panacea for the world’s ills. It is, on the contrary, that politics, society, morality and collective institutions matter” (O’Toole 2010: 12).

### **The Celtic Tiger Boom and Bust**

At the beginning of what can be considered a new era initiated at the turn of the twenty-first century, some of the old pillars of de Valera’s Romantic Ireland were tottering, while others had already collapsed. Although not corresponding with the real representation of Ireland, homogenising perspectives and stiff definitions of Irishness of these former discourses – strongly characterised by, and related in previous decades with, Catholicism, nationalism and an attachment and celebration of the land, conservatism and a preference for frugality – requested now different readings of history. There was a need to reinvent Ireland (Kirby et al. 2002) by delimiting myth and reality, dismantling preconceptions, and creating new integrationist discourses in harmony with present realities. Already articulated in the 1970s, these palpable reconfigurations were accelerated and cemented, little by little, with the Celtic Tiger. The phenomenon, which evidenced an incipient phase at the beginning of the 1990s, triggered other concerns, forms, ideas, and perceptions, transforming the Republic beyond recognition.

The mid-1990s, then, marked the beginning of a new period for Ireland, one of rapid economic growth that was known as the “Celtic Tiger”, “the Boom”, or “Ireland’s Economic Miracle”. In the words of Denis O’Hearn, “Ireland became a tiger economy on 31 August 1994” (1998: 1), and on the same day the promise of peace was materialising in Northern Ireland with the Irish Republican Army (IRA) cease-fire. It was at this time that the Republic of Ireland became the envy of the world and even “some Americans with a serious prospect of power began to dream of being more like Ireland. Not as in wearing Aran sweaters, drinking pints of Guinness and waxing lyrical in a charming brogue, but in real, serious economic terms” (O’Toole 2010: 11).

Economic performance altered definitions and behaviours, and changed the fabric of this country due to the vertiginous speed of the process of an arguably American form of capitalism that triggered associated phenomena often reduced or understood simplistically as “Americanisation”.<sup>2</sup> The Celtic Tiger and globalisation brought to the forefront social issues with continuous referendums that culminated in the legalisation of contraception, divorce, same-sex marriage, and abortion at the turn of the twenty-first century. Affected visibly by all these changes, the Irish family unit, apart from the traditional nuclear family, started to resemble those of other Western societies by becoming smaller, single-parent, childless, and formed by homosexual, unmarried or separated partners. Moreover, the incipient wave of secularisation of Irish society and the Catholic Church’s loss of power reflected the Irish people’s attempts to leave behind the conservative and repressive dimensions of their faith. The expanded freedom could be perceived in the relaxation and increasing openness of discourses around what until then were taboo issues, such as abuse, violence, homosexuality, sex and the body.

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<sup>2</sup>As a matter of fact, this process of the Americanisation of Irishness – as well as the reverse – are not new phenomena. For O’Toole (1990), “America and Ireland represent not opposites, not a dialogue of modernity and tradition, but a continual intertwining [...]. When we deal with this relationship, we are dealing not with something final and closed, but with something obsessive, repetitive, continually unfinished, all the time renewing itself in old ways” (197). Although presented from a different prism and referring to a different historical moment other than the Celtic Tiger, *The Americanisation of Ireland Migration and Settlement, 1841–1925* (Fitzpatrick 2019), for example, explores how the return of emigrants from America to Ireland often affected, moulded and Americanised post-Famine Irish society.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, while contemporary Irish culture was still learning how to define itself as it struggled against both the repressive weight of history and the alienation of modernity (Kearney as quoted in Ní Éigeartaigh 2009: 15), the booming economic climate made Irish people forget, for a time, Ireland's past "besmirched with treacheries and suppressions" (Barry 2007: 22). Many warned about the fragility of the pillars of this new world. The easy access to credit, the growth of a property bubble, tax exemptions or low tariffs for foreign investors, inflation, mad consumerism, excessive government spending and corruption precipitated a dramatic end to the era of economic ferment. This paper considers the year 2007 to be an inflection point when a line was drawn between Celtic Tiger and Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. At this time, it was obvious that the national miracle had become a nightmare overnight, and Ireland witnessed "the death of the tiger" (Coen and Maguire 2012). In September 2008, the Fianna Fáil–Green Party ruling coalition spoke openly about Ireland's imminent economic deterioration. Sales and property values collapsed, and the banks floundered in chaos due to frenetic lending and the resulting surfeit of bad debt.

For many, throughout the boom and bust it was "not just money that has been lost; it is a sense of what, for better or worse, it meant to be 'us'" (O'Toole 2010: 3-4). Although *There Are Little Kingdoms* was published shortly before the chaos triggered by the recession, the many different versions of Ireland offered in these short stories are infused with a feeling of imminent disaster.

### **Glimpses of Celtic Tiger Ireland**

*There Are Little Kingdoms* is a collection deeply concerned with Irish language, lifestyle, culture, and its citizens. The author himself described the development of this volume of short stories as a slow and laborious process that "had been slowly oozing from my fetid little brain onto the computer screen for the best part of seven years" (Barry and Chiew 2007), a fact that leads Barry to conclude that "art is a hideously painful business" (Barry and Chiew 2007), and that short story writing is "a very strange and mysterious art [...] the more practised you become in writing short stories – the closer you get to your work – the more mysterious it becomes. Short stories are very weird that way" (Barry and Lee 2013). The complexity of this type of literature is observable in the fabric of *There Are Little Kingdoms*. The book has received favourable responses from critics, who catalogue it as "a brilliant collection of short pieces which showcases both the fine poetry of Barry's language and the deep-seated humanity of his comic ramblings" ("Congrats to Kevin Barry!" 2013). *There Are Little Kingdoms* is a vibrant amalgam of original and intelligent fiction, where despite a sense of gloom and darkness, Barry is still able to find goodness in all possible places and to keep readers laughing, because in their deepest sense, these literary pieces are comedies.

The collection is formed by thirteen stories written in a style defined by Barry as "probably 'realistic', whatever that means" (Barry and Chiew 2007). However, the disordered economic, social, political and cultural environment in which the work was written clearly pushed the author to deal with the materiality surrounding him using experimental techniques such as cinematographic methods or narrative modes charged with intertextuality, abstraction or magic realism to create surreal and dystopian scenarios. Here the author meticulously follows the tradition of storytelling and nurtures this literary creation in the troubled atmosphere of his mother country, Ireland. This is how Barry is able to focus on the lyrical impulse in this work, moving smoothly between pathos and humour, at times "going out toward the very edge of believability" and at others, presenting plots that resemble reality and "drama buried just underneath the surface of everyday speech. And it's in what's not being said, *that's* (The author's emphasis) where you'll find the story" (Barry and Steffens 2021). Here the influence of Barry's hometown, Limerick, is acutely felt: the city is transformed in

the scenario for several plots, and it also surfaces through the use of its regional vernacular register. The language of this prose, then, is suffused with localisms, strongly rooted in this part of Ireland, scattered with descriptive and distant observations of the courts, city, council meetings and journeys by bus and train, thanks to Barry's experience as a local journalist in his twenties. Dialogues, are thus transformed into an entertaining and lively art where each character speaks according to their condition, and the fragments seem to be taken from real life. This evidences the author's familiarity with the vernacular and how this oral tradition translates into the literary form. Nonetheless, this short fiction is also lyrical and sentimental, using poetic language to strike a contrast with the dark lives of the stories' working-class inhabitants and the harshness of their Irish slang (McKnight 2010). Consequently, "[the] limitless possibilities of language as a visual medium has both seduced and shaped him, [as it] frees [Barry] from feeling any debt to the actual, and that's a good thing". Plots, therefore, are born in "a wonderful blend of past, present and imagined future" (Thomas 2011), scattered with hilarious observations about some of the vicissitudes of common, ordinary lives. Despite the darkly humorous tone of the collection, the Ireland depicted here is a country at the end of the millennium, confronting a new period of change. This is a country that is learning how to live at the beginning of the twenty-first century in the booming economic climate, while it witnesses the arrival of thousands of immigrants to Ireland.

The collection presents a land that, at first glance, appears to be either pre- or post-Celtic Tiger. In fact, however, it is concurrent with that economic phenomenon; the contemporary Republic of these stories is a curiously ragged place. In this fictional world, days in unnamed Irish towns are trivialised, the absurdity of the human condition is laid bare, and loud truths hidden behind smokescreens of optimism and empty discourses of advancement are disclosed to highlight the incompleteness of Ireland's metamorphosis and a disheartening reality. Evoking O'Toole's (2010) connections established between change, coherence, time and space (180), the world inhabited by the protagonists at times advances in slow motion, and at times the depicted sceneries seem suspended in time, untouched by changes; this is viscerally reflected in the white, black and grey tones and symbolism used to create the frameworks of the plots.

Although it is generally thought that a short story should be readable in a single sitting, these pieces of short fiction demand a slow reading (Barry and Chiew 2007) – or several – because here, mere glances offer the key to understanding the rationale behind the actions of psychologically damaged and simultaneously familiar characters who inhabit these stories: drinkers, lovers, drug dealers, adolescents, singers, gamblers, talkers, dreamers, parents, problematic sons and daughters, and others. Although dark humour is certainly present, and these characters' peculiarities can be amusing, their realities are quite moving. These personas are wrapped in a sense of pessimism, gloom, regret, impossibility, and hopelessness. Poignant pieces of reality assume prominence through vivid snapshots, while action is side-lined, relegated to the background, braked by, and subjected to the sordid impassivity of their protagonists. Almost all of the compelling characters, each of them fleshed out by Barry's pungent powers of description (Barry and Chiew 2007), are common Irish people who feel frustrated with their lives but do not try to fight back or rebel against destiny; rather, they seem to abandon themselves to circumstances and fatalism, attending with resignation to their harsh realities and misery. Characters' aimless journeys with unclear destinations may invite readers to draw a comparison with the aimlessness felt by many sectors of the Irish population during the Celtic Tiger period due to the displacement and aloofness produced by the rapid changes and social and economic inequality.

Loneliness surfaces often in fleeting glimpses, compelling characters to seek refuge in unexpected places and unexpected ways to smother this feeling. Some of the protagonists attempt to combat loneliness by finding support in others, as in "The Wintersongs", where a

mad old woman, “skinny, tall, sharp, angled and grey-skinned, with ash-coloured eyes and green-mottled hands”(Barry 2007: 77), feels the need to narrate certain life events to an uninterested girl who sits next to her in a train. Nonetheless, the effectiveness of these attempts to find affection and understanding are demystified, as characters end up declaring loneliness as being preferable to bad company, not only in “To the Hills” (ibid 13), but also in the story “Animal Needs”(ibid 34). In the latter, an emotionally distant farmer and his wife seek refuge from their marital problems by switching partners with a neighbouring family and end up worsening their relationship.

Not only solitude, but also fear of change and insecurity – curiously, associated here with prosperity – are kept at bay through adherence to senseless routines and obsessive or destructive behaviours, even if, contradictorily, all these people long for novelty. These protagonists are presented as suffering from a serious lack of values, which afflicts older and younger generations alike. Nevertheless, Barry can excuse his personas through dotting stories with touching details that elicit feelings of leniency in the reader.

Snapshots attempt to approach reality by depicting how juvenile delinquency – although unequally distributed among the population – was soaring in some parts of Ireland (Fitzgerald 2008) despite the freedom and wellbeing generated by Celtic Tiger prosperity. This aspect can be observed in “Ideal Homes” (ibid 62), for instance, where two sixteen-year-old twin girls living in a remote village surrounded by “forlorn hills and inhabited by forlorn people” (ibid 62) find an occupation in wanderings and mischief in the absence of their parents. Similarly, the story of idle James and his gang of rural youngsters who destroy car windscreens in the suburbs just for fun, out of boredom, or for lack of better prospects as in “Atlantic City” (ibid1), or the involvement in the dark business of trafficking drugs and medications to teenagers as in the case for Ollie in “Party at Helen’s” (ibid 82), are also relevant examples for the ongoing discussion on juvenile delinquency.

Although in the national conception, the Celtic Tiger was supposedly a breath of fresh air that banished “depression and inferiority” (O’Toole 2010:21), almost every single story in the collection depicts characters who are too damaged, too lonely, or too wasted to function without medication, alcohol or drugs – unifying elements of the collection. Even if all of these substances help the characters evade or cope with reality, they also further desensitise and alienate protagonists while fuelling poor decisions. These elements are everywhere in the work, even in the most bizarre situations. Driven by envy, Marie in “To the Hills” (Barry 2007: 13), decides to dull the pain of her loneliness in wine and “fast vodka” (ibid19), and ultimately destroys her friendship with Teresa for a man she is not even interested in. In “See the Tree, How Big it’s Grown” (ibid 21), R.K. Tobin, an amnesic protagonist, runs a small fast-food business, which he needs to keep functioning as a form of therapy to combat his predilection for drinking, the painful memories of a tumultuous and traumatic childhood, and his guilt at having committed rape; all of these burdens return and encroach upon his mind, gradually and in sudden flashes, as the story unfolds. In “Breakfast Wine” (ibid 95), the reader is introduced to Thomas, Brendan, and Mr Kelliher, who spend their hopeless lives in a typical local pub. Here, they are joined by a mysterious woman who decides to drink to forget her abusive and jealous husband. Pubs, consequently, appear in these stories as often as the hills do; sometimes they are the sole setting, as in “Breakfast Wine” (ibid 95). This is not a coincidence, considering the fact that public houses are places of everyday community life; they are symbols of continuity and regularity, for the Irish people they represent sense, time and security (Tovey and Share 2003: 373) at a moment of profound metamorphoses and uncertainty brought on by the Celtic Tiger.

To continue offering cases in point in the same direction, the inexplicable behaviour and visions of the major character of “There Are Little Kingdoms” (Barry 2007: 119) indicate a clear alcohol and drug dependency, and Ralph, a disillusioned middle-aged man with

psychological problems – and the interlocutor of the modern genie in “Burn the Bad Lamp” (ibid 107) – acknowledges: “I can’t be dealing with this kind of messin’. I’m on tablets” (ibid 110). In “Ideal Homes” (ibid 62), Donna and Dee drink, steal and commit crimes. The omniscient narrator informs the reader about their mother’s habit of spending her afternoons with “Valium and vodka, curtains drawn” (ibid 64), thus giving free rein to the twins’ mischief. Non-absent parents cannot be considered either good role models, as in “Animal Needs” (ibid 34) for example, John and Mary are capable of drugging their child and dog just to have a free night for their toxic and all-consuming affairs.

Escapism in alcohol, drugs, and medicine consumption has a second dimension in these works, blurring the lines between reality and imagination, and between the material nature and tangibility of the settings of the short stories. Locations vary as the stories shift gradually from Western towns and villages to Midwestern ones, eventually trespassing the country’s borders. Despite the fact that in many of these stories, the reader can catch sight of the Celtic Tiger, a typical Irish magic realism permeates in “The Last Days of the Buffalo” (ibid 52), “Burn the Bad Lamp” (ibid 107) and “There Are Little Kingdoms” (ibid 119). Nonetheless, this is not the Celtic magic world of leprechauns and fairies, but a darker and more disturbing one. In “The Last Days of the Buffalo” (ibid 52), for example, on the morning of his fourteenth birthday, Foley, a six-foot-five teenager with massive hands (ibid 52-54), can foretell the death of those who shake hands with him. “Burn the Bad Lamp” (ibid 107) presents a peculiar, eccentric, Nike-wearing genie (ibid 110), who is the product of the deranged mind of the story’s other protagonist. “There Are Little Kingdoms” (ibid 119) recounts sombre events that point to a metaphysical, alternative sphere of reality. Here, characters are dead people who terrorise Fitz, a mentally unstable adult who witnesses surreal events, receives calls from nowhere and has spine-chilling visions of walking dead people. In the middle of endless and indecipherable diatribes, the narrator does not even bother to offer a logical explanation that may explain the mystery, although as the plot unfolds his proclivity for heavy drinking and medication becomes increasingly clear.

Barry’s experimentation with magic in these three short stories is a breath of fresh air to the other, realist kingdoms explored in the rest of the collection. This may also clarify the title of the collection, as a clear parallelism is established between, on the one hand, the Celtic Tiger prosperity with these feelings of drunkenness or numbness induced by alcohol, drugs and medications – and on the other, that of the allegorical hangover provoked by the real economic bust of Ireland (O’Toole 2010: 10). Much in line with these ideas are Alkareem Atteh’s (2021) observations on the idea of place and country, which seem to fit well with Barry’s decision to create different types of *little kingdoms* among the pages of this collection.

Writers have to have two countries [...] [The] first is the country to which one belongs by citizenship or dwelling, while the latter is the one that the writers make through their imagination; it is “romantic ... it is not real but is really there”. This second place of imagination, the one [he] prefers, is where the writers “live really”. It is of one’s own choice and even creation. If writers are made by the first country, then they can make another. This belief in the possibility of place being created and made (that is, in the fluidity of place) [...]. (Alkareem Atteh 2021: 1)

Following these allusions, the image of Celtic Tiger Ireland provided by Barry is constructed as a mirage, a fluid nowhere where changes are occurring – but where paradoxically and at the same time, stasis permeates. This false image of modernity, as the following pages will show, is a fundamental theme in this collection, where misery, loneliness, dissatisfaction, paralysis and desolation characterise the plots’ realities.

Another experimental technique used to explore the extent of Celtic Tiger Ireland's uneven transformations appears in "Party at Helen's" (Barry 2007: 82) which, in both style and thematics, recalls James Joyce's "The Dead" (2006: 135). The tapestry of themes in "The Dead" is a rich one, interlacing emotions, love, loss and strong insights into Irish identity, experienced and professed by characters who confront retrospection and sudden revelations during their gathering in a house for a party. The parallelisms between the two works go deeper still; the Joycean "Party at Helen's" (Barry 2007:82) is characterised by a cinematic approach wherein the plot acts as a hidden camera that grants the reader a view of all the guests gathered for a party on a Saturday night in Galway. In Barry's story, the focus shifts from one character to another, providing profound sketches of randomly selected characters, although the action is very limited.

"Party at Helen's" (ibid 82), as a matter of fact, is an important and transitional gate to some years before the advent of the Celtic Tiger. The ensuing Americanisation, globalisation or *contamination* of traditionalist Ireland with new ideas that would replace some old ones, as well as the desire of "the Irish [who] had dreamed of being like Americans – an ambition that millions of them fulfilled in the flesh" (O'Toole 2010: 11), are already very marked in this short story. "Party at Helen's" (Barry 2007: 82) contains recurrent references to big brand names that also appear in other short stories such as "See the Tree, How Big it's Grown" (ibid 21), where the amnesic man owns a "Reebok holdall" (ibid 23); or in "Burn the Bad Lamp" (ibid 107), where even the traditional genie now sports a trendy new image thanks to his "pair of scuffed Nikes" (ibid 110). In "Party at Helen's" (ibid 82), Irish youngsters seek to imitate American actresses like Jane Fonda, wearing glamorous silver dresses and international brands. Judging by the description of their glamorous attire, the reader may imagine that the characters, "a couple of dozen people – you'd say children if you could see them now" (ibid 82) are partying in a luxurious venue. However, Barry shatters this illusion by describing the real site, a ruined rented house (ibid 82). In spite of the fact that in certain respects, stasis seems to permeate the discourse of Celtic Tiger Ireland, this short story introduces the theme of profound societal and cultural transformations triggered by that phenomenon. Its teenaged characters are all dependent on cheap drugs, they consume copious amounts of alcohol, and they do not feel shy in expressing themselves, nor in maintaining an open or homosexual relationship. This is the case of Mary Pearson, depicted by Barry as a rich and rebellious girl who "had deep sexual talent and was becoming even more comfortable in its realm [...] She'd slept already with three of the boys and two of the girls of the party" (ibid 86). The *cosmopolitanism* of these sons and daughters contrasts starkly with the conservatism of their parents, former generations forged in the austerity of Éamon de Valera's government and the prudery infused by an upbringing and adulthood marked by Catholic sentiment – entire generations recalling tradition, remembrance, and an ordered, secure past (O'Toole 1997: XI).

Nonetheless – and despite pretensions – sons, daughters, and their parents are very much alike in so many aspects. This critique is voiced by Coll, a young man who aims to "educate the west of Ireland to the pleasures of old-skool Detroit techno" (Barry 2007: 90), but who feels frustrated when he realises that his efforts are in vain and that people who consider themselves to be modern "wanted to listen to the same old same old, week in week out" (ibid 91). These brushstrokes provided by "Party at Helen's" (ibid 82) contain sufficient information to elicit some relevant conclusions: the first alludes to the strength of Irish culture: its "capacity for doublethink" (O'Toole 2007: 180), which is mirrored in Barry's characters' tendency to embrace both change and the past; another has to do with the failed attempts to secure wealth and glamour in a world where misery, ugliness and dirtiness prevail, and where potential improvement seems superficial and unfinished due to social and economic inequalities that represented the Celtic Tiger phenomenon.

*There Are Little Kingdoms* frequently insists on representing the imperfectness, unevenness, and incompleteness of the phenomenon (Armie 2019). The Celtic Tiger era, was a time of changes, as signalled in the blurb of O’Toole’s book *Ship of Fools*: “Intel, Dell and Apple built factories, in small towns. Churches were turned into swanky hotels. Croissants came to every rural village. Dublin’s property prices soared above London’s”. These references can be observed in some of the short stories. The gradual loss of power of the Church, for instance, arrives at its critical point in “Party at Helen’s” (Barry 2007: 82), where the reader learns that at the party, “the table had flyers for pizza, taxis and Jesus” (ibid 87). The idea of such an extremely thin layer separating the sacred and the profane is also reinforced in other stories such as “To the Hills” (ibid 13), in which the three protagonists spend the night at the St Ignatius of Loyola B&B.

“Last Days of the Buffalo” (ibid 52) presents the evolution of the Irish economy that “defied geography by inserting the American way of doing business into Europe” (O’Toole 2010: 12) by depicting the radical transformation of a local business. Foley’s workplace, for example, suffers gradual changes experienced by the over sensitive major character with serious discomfort.

At the start, it was just two pumps beside a dirty little kiosk for the till. Midwestern rain hammered down on the plastic roof. Electric fire, a kettle, a crossword and Foley might have been in the womb he was so cosy. [...] He near filled the kiosk. Foley found himself with colleagues. But word came through and there was quickly great change. Statoil bought out Texaco and the kiosk was bulldozed. An air-conditioned, glass-fronted store went up, with automatic doors and cooler units. Foley found himself with colleagues. The next thing they were squeezing him into a uniform and sticking a bright red had up top. Then they started fucking about with croissants. (Barry 2007: 53)

This place is only one of the thousands of small businesses and industries that, during the period of aggressive prosperity, saw themselves engulfed by the foreign multinationals, idea also remarked by Mr Kelliher, one of the characters of the story “Breakfast Wine” (ibid 85).

Barry, then, is careful to present this economic advancement as a two-sided coin, as something that brought about other harsh consequences, among them contamination and the destruction of the natural environment that might go unnoticed, but which exist. Recalling O’Toole’s criticism, according to which “[i]n other countries, global warming is a threat. In Ireland it is a fantasy” (O’Toole 2010: 169), frequently, short stories denounce pollution that originates in the new factories, and which provokes the death of the river in “Animal Needs” (Barry 2007: 34). Furthermore, in “Last Days of the Buffalo”(ibid 53), the grass and reeds are dusted grey with the factory’s discharge, and in “Burn the Bad Lamp” so are the fauna, as “the seabirds jacked up on weird emissions from the chemical plants downriver stand with deranged eyes on the quayside walls”(ibid 113).

The parallels between Ireland and America are further explored in “Atlantic City” (ibid 1), as the author mocks the former’s pretensions to progress by establishing a comparison between the aforementioned American city and Moloney’s Garage, “an old shed that he’d used for a storeroom, it was maybe forty foot long and half as wide, and he’d installed there a pool table, three video games, a wall-mounted jukebox and a pinball machine” (ibid 2). Painted in an Irish tricolour motif, Moloney’s Garage is the gathering place for local problematic adolescents, whose lives in a small countryside village appear untouched by change and prosperity, but for these allusions to America with invocations of the “Atlantic City game” or the American musician Stevie Wonder.

If “Atlantic City” (ibid 1) offers some views on false prosperity, in “Animal Needs” (ibid 34), the theme of non-development is indisputably present beneath the efforts for transformation in the crushing description of Meadowsweet Farm – nothing but a pet project or vote-catching exercise, where money was invested without any attempt to analyse the costs and benefits (O’Toole 2010: 22). Meadowsweet Farm is

not the place you have prepared for. There is no waft of harvest to perfume the air. There is no contented lowing from the fields. These are not happy acres. Meadowsweet Farm is put together out of breeze blocks, barbed wire and galvanised tin. The land is flat and featureless. There are sawn-off barrels filled with rancid rainwater. A snapped cable cracks like a whip and lifts sparks from a dismal concrete yard-the electricians are haywire. The septic tank is backed up. The poultry shed is the secret torture facility of a Third World regime, long rumoured by shivering peasants in the mountain night. Desperation reigns, and we hear it as a croaky bayou howl. (Ibid 34)

The poultry farm should be thriving, but its overseer, John Martin, is not the faithful stereotype of a rosy-cheeked farmer (ibid 34). His business is a disaster because, firstly, its owner has concerns other than hard work, and secondly, the national situation of Ireland does not seem to help:

There are crisis levels of debt. There is alcoholism and garrulousness and depressive ideation. There is the great disease of familiarity. These are long, bruised days on the midland plain. People wake in the night and shout out names they have never known. There is an amount of lead insult among the young. [...] There is addiction to prescription medications and catalogue shopping. Boys with pesticide eyes pull handbrake turns at four in the morning and scream the names of dark angels. (ibid 36)

Doubtless, this image of the Celtic Tiger Ireland of 2002 is not what should be expected, considering that, at this precise point in history, Ireland was supposedly immersed in a period of affluence and wellbeing. However, once again the real picture, as seen through these stories about the Irish people, depicted by Barry and analysed throughout these pages, is something altogether different. Apart from seeing beyond appearances, the book perfectly anticipates the collapse of the Irish system, and the ensuing recession that followed it, by alluding to the inevitability of those cycles of disgrace and fatality that afflicted Ireland in the past and their imminent actuality in the present, sensed by the Irish people themselves in “the great disease of familiarity” (ibid 36), even during prosperity.

In 2017, Kevin Gardiner – the man credited with coining the term *Celtic Tiger* – affirmed his belief that the very term itself may have contributed to the hubris that ultimately slew the tiger (Carswell 2017), that the new and infused sense of confidence “made people cut corners and rely a little too heavily on the cliché” (Carswell 2017). Pointing in the same direction, Barry’s critical scrutiny, which borders on derision and is much present in all these pieces – even in those unfolding in parallel dimensions characterised by magic – coincides fully with these observations, and recalls O’Toole’s (2010) remarks on the attitude of Irish people at the time, who “amused themselves with fantasy lifestyles and pet projects while the opportunity to break cycles of deprivation [...] was frittered away. They turned self-confidence into arrogance, optimism into swagger, aspiration into self-delusion” (20). Both ways of looking at Ireland, either through fiction or non-fiction (Fahey et al. 2007), insinuate that – setting aside the matter of money – in many of Ireland’s *little kingdoms*, complex

social, historical, and political reforms were needed, but these failed to materialise during a period of material wealth.

## Conclusion

This collection features a cast of characters whose stories recall clashes between “tradition and modernity, local and global, between the values of a rural, Catholic society and the aspirations of the young for personal freedom, emotional satisfaction and material abundance” (O’Toole 2010: 184). Through snapshots, these stories approach the Celtic Tiger phenomenon to highlight its incompleteness since prosperity did not penetrate to all levels of society. Consequently, these pieces of short fiction offer some relevant conclusions; even though these works communicate certain timid attempts towards prosperity and glamour, in these *little kingdoms*, misery, ugliness and dirtiness prevail. An ostensible improvement seems to barely scratch the surface of a problem, and behind the attempts to demonstrate this image of a new, modern and prosperous Ireland, paralysis is ever-present in the characters’ aimless journeys to unclear destinations or their senseless actions and lives, which sometimes appear to have remained nearly untouched by the prosperity and change that supposedly abound in their country.

There is no happiness in this fictional world – only disgrace and solitude. The characters seem to be submerged in a monotonous, hopeless trance in a world where, despite the transformations occurring around them, their realities are disheartening and the promised progress never materialises, as “Ireland is not Ireland anymore but someplace else” (O’Toole 2010: 190). Broken characters show a clear lack of morality and values. These rural and small-town people are involved in strange and insane relationships, they drink and take pills to escape the reality of their senseless existences. The younger generations take drugs and commit criminal acts to stifle the boredom they suffer in desolate locations. They come from – and form – dismembered or dysfunctional families.

In short, Barry’s stories were somehow able to foresee the collapse of the Irish system – that “false economy of facades and fictions” (O’Toole 2010: 19) – as well as the resulting recession that followed, by exposing the fragile structures on which the untenable economic model of the Celtic Tiger had been constructed. Literature, as this analysis has shown, can see beyond superficial appearances – and thus can interpret reality and offer poignant snapshots through “cultural memory and local knowledge, even of a fugitive, endangered kind, [which] operate as shadow texts [...], allowing a culture to look at itself, as it were, through a glass, darkly” (Gibbons 2005: 218).

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