Cuad. Invest. Filol., 55 (2024), 95-111. http://doi.org/10.18172/cif.5961

ON THE TRACKS OF THE PAST: GUILT AND SHAME IN JOHN BOYNE'S *A HISTORY OF LONELINESS*

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ABSTRACT: The first novel by John Boyne set in Ireland, *A History of Loneliness* (2014), is an excellent example of ageing along the history of Ireland itself. The novel is narrated by an old man who looks back on his life and explores his past against the background of the historical, social, and political changes that his country underwent in the second half of the twentieth century, especially in terms of religion and sexuality. Issues of guilt and shame are also ubiquitous in the novel, since the motivation of the narrator and protagonist to tell his story comes from a desire to come to terms with his past, the actions and inactions that still shame him to this day. The aim of this essay is to analyze how guilt and shame linger in Odran's old age, especially paying attention to Boyne's strategies to foreground these affects in *A History of Loneliness*.

KEYWORDS: Ireland, guilt, shame, religion, *A History of Loneliness,* Boyne.

SOBRE LAS HUELLAS DEL PASADO: CULPA Y VERGÜENZA EN *A HISTORY OF LONELINESS,* DE JOHN BOYNE

RESUMEN: La primera novela de John Boyne ambientada en Irlanda, *A History of Loneliness* (2014), es un ejemplo excelente del envejecimiento a lo largo de la historia de la propia Irlanda. La novela está narrada por un hombre mayor que mira hacia atrás en su vida y explora su pasado comparándolo con el escenario de los cambios históricos, sociales y políticos que su país experimentó en la segunda mitad del siglo XX, sobre todo en cuanto a religión y sexualidad. Los temas de culpa y vergüenza también están omnipresentes en la novela, dado que la motivación del narrador y protagonista de contar su historia viene del deseo de aceptar su pasado, incluyendo las acciones e inacciones que todavía le avergüenzan hoy. El objetivo de este ensayo es el de analizar cómo la culpa y la vergüenza aún persisten en la vejez de Odran, especialmente prestando atención a las estrategias de Boyne para destacar estos afectos en *A History of Loneliness.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: Irlanda, culpa, vergüenza, religión, *A History of Loneliness,* Boyne.

SUR LES TRACES DU PASSÉ : LA CULPABILITÉ ET LA HONTE DANS *A HISTORY OF LONELINESS*, DE JOHN BOYNE

RÉSUMÉ : Le premier roman de John Boyne situé en Irlande, *A History of Loneliness* (2014), est un excellent exemple du vieillissement tout le long de l'histoire de l'Irlande elle-même. Le roman est raconté par un vieil homme qui se remémore sa vie et explore son passé à la lumière des changements historiques, sociaux et politiques qu'a connus son pays dans la seconde moitié du XXe siècle, notamment en termes de religion et de sexualité. Les questions de culpabilité et de honte sont également omniprésentes dans le roman, puisque la motivation qui pousse le narrateur et protagoniste à raconter son histoire vient du désir d'accepter son passé, même les actions et les inactions qui le hantent encore aujourd'hui. L'objectif de cet essai est d'analyser comment la culpabilité et la honte persistent dans la vieillesse d'Odran, en prêtant notamment attention aux stratégies de Boyne pour mettre en avant ces sentiments dans *A History of Loneliness.*

MOTS-CLÉS : Irlande, culpabilité, honte, religion, *A History of Loneliness*, Boyne.

Recibido: 27/02/2024. Aceptado: 02/07/2024

1. Introduction

The socio-cultural landscape of Ireland, mainly from the 1960s onwards, has been significantly shaped by religion, which has influenced the country profoundly and has caused its culture and society to undergo deep changes, particularly concerning sexuality or the role of women. For the past century, Ireland had been highly influenced by the Catholic Church, to the extent that it held much power in the country, and so its culture has been rooted in religious standards—at least until the second half of the twentieth century. From then on, the gradual secularization of the country has brought about significant changes in terms of the liberalization of social attitudes, especially regarding gender and sexuality. Women in Ireland have abandoned the role the Church had placed them in, and homosexuality is no longer a criminal act. This ongoing secularization, moreover, has also influenced the social view on priests and other members of the Church, as opposed to how they were viewed in the past.

This article looks first into the transformations Ireland has experienced from the second half of the twentieth century until the present day, mainly in terms of religion. This brings about issues of guilt and shame, as shall be seen, which will be analysed in this context using a contemporary Irish novel: John Boyne's *A History of Loneliness* (2014). Boyne's protagonist is a witness of said changes, and the novel as a whole becomes an excellent portrayal of the gradual modifications that the Republic

of Ireland has undergone for the last six decades. The novel is narrated by an old man, Odran, who looks back on his life and explores his past against the background of the historical, social, and political changes taking place in Ireland at the time. As mentioned, issues of guilt and shame are also ubiquitous in the novel, since the motivation of the narrator and protagonist to tell his story comes from a desire to come to terms with his past, with the actions and inactions that still shame him to this day.

Thus, in *A History of Loneliness* Boyne presents the reader with the story of Father Odran Yates, a priest surrounded by the scandal of sexual abuse perpetrated by the Catholic Church in Ireland and its cover-up by its high spheres of power. The author presents the reader with an old narrator who is examining his past to understand how he has reached the present moment. He starts tackling his childhood, focusing on the traumatic death of his father and little brother in 1964. Odran also deals with his adolescence and his time in the seminary, revisiting his friendship with Tom Cardle. He focuses next on his year abroad in Rome with the Pope, including his shameful episode with a Roman waitress. Finally, he discusses his final years as a teacher of English at an Irish school. It is here, in old age, when he is able to admit to what he could not before, namely that he had more than mere suspicions to condemn priests' (including Tom's) abuse of children, but he did nothing against it. Indeed, for most part of the novel, Odran shows his innocence and naiveté, which drive him to draw conclusions about people around him that do not prove to be accurate or even reliable. Certain events or comments should make him understand that immoral acts are taking place around him, but he prefers to hide those thoughts at the back of his mind. That passivity is what keeps haunting him, adding to his guilty conscience and provoking his confessional narrative.

The novel, then, focuses on the scandals of sexual abuse perpetrated by the Irish Catholic Church, which, along with other developments such as Ireland's membership in the EU in 1973 and its increasing internationalization, led to the Church's loss of influence in Irish politics and the gradual secularization of the country. Odran's story is that of an Irish priest who, at the end of his life, looks back to understand how he has reached the present moment, to justify his faults and silences. Guilt lingers in his old age, and it is with his narrative that he is able to admit to what he knew but did not find the courage to say—in other words, to ask for forgiveness. In so doing, the novel also explores the recent history of Ireland. In fact, it is through its cultural and social changes that the protagonist tells his story, in an attempt to come to terms with his past and that of his country.

With *A History of Loneliness*, John Boyne sets a novel in his homeland, Ireland, for the first time in his prolific literary career. He himself explains this by claiming that he did not want to write about Ireland until he had a story worth telling (Boyne

The Guardian; *WHSmith*, 2018). He continues stating that he is now confident enough to write about Ireland and real events in his life, as both *A History of Loneliness* and *The Heart's Invisible Furies* show (*WHSmith*, 2018).[1] Regarding the former, the novel is extremely personal for Boyne because he was a student at Terenure College himself, where he was abused in two occasions by members of the staff (Boyne, 2021). It is significant that Boyne chooses this school to set the protagonist of his story, portraying a teacher who silently knew of the actions of some colleagues, namely Miles Donlan in the novel, whom Boyne has identified with former teacher John McClean. McClean was sentenced to eight years in prison in February 2021, following a trial for "assaulting 23 pupils between 1973 and 1990" (Power, 2021) in Terenure College. Significantly, survivors claim that the "abuse had been covered up", since the response of the school at the time "was one of 'silence and indifference'" (Power, 2021). *A History of Loneliness* shows how this is carried out.

This article focuses on how Boyne uses shame and guilt to bring to the fore the responsibility of Irish population as regards to the cases of sexual abuse within the Irish Catholic Church. The narratological strategies of silence, retrospection, unreliable narration, and the significance of memory are used by Boyne to emphasize the trigger and consequences of guilt and shame in his novel.

2. Religion in Ireland

The sociocultural changes that Ireland has undergone in the last seventy years are essential to understand both the novel and its protagonist's struggles. These past years have seen the secularization of the country, with the downfall of the Catholic Church as bearer of power—resulting, among other reasons, from the continuous sexual scandals and their cover-ups that have stained the reputation of the Church—the rise and fall of the Celtic Tiger, and an increase in immigration (Hololan and Tracy, 2014: 2). Given the main themes tackled in *A History of Loneliness*, this section focuses on aspects of religion to see its development in Irish society in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in order to understand the protagonist's struggles in the novel.

Throughout the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth century, Ireland was predominantly a Catholic country in which the Church was the ruler. It controlled the most significant aspects of Irish society, namely education, morality, health, economy, or politics (Andersen, 2010: 17; Inglis, 1998: 245; Smyth, 2012). In other words, in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ireland,

[1] For an analysis of guilt and shame in *The Heart's Invisible Furies*, see Muro (2023).

> the Catholic Church established a monopoly over religion and the meaning of life. Its teachings and theologies provided a detailed, comprehensive worldview. Its symbols, beliefs, and practices became key ingredients in the webs of meanings into which most Irish people were born and suspended and the webs they spun afresh in their everyday lives. (Inglis, 2014: 123)

This power was not merely attributed to the Church because the Irish people identified with its doctrines, but it was also seen as an opposition to British rule (Cullingford, 1997: 159; Nault, 2018: 130), and so Irishness was linked to Catholicism (Andersen, 2010; Cullingford, 1997; Murphy, 1976).

The secularization of Ireland began to gradually appear from the 1960s onwards, primarily with the messages brought by foreign media (Inglis, 1998: 246; 2007: 77; 2014: 10; Breen, 2010: 2), Ireland's membership in the EU in 1973, and the increasing internationalization of the country, as well as the influence of industrialization, the "availability of travel", the "access to secondary education", the rise of the women's movement (Lynch, 1985: 507), and that of materialism, consumerism, and individualism (Inglis, 2007: 76). The growing secularization finds its peak in the scandals of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church and the appearance in 2009 of the Murphy Report, in which both the Church and the Gardaí are accused of having covered up these allegations throughout the years, together with the "severe physical and sexual abuse in institutions such as the industrial schools and the Magdalene Laundries" (Nault, 2018: 138). Consequently, Irish people's belief in God, their church attendance, and the amount of religious personnel dropped significantly, especially with the arrival of the new century (Andersen, 2010: 19-20; Breen & Reynolds, 2011: 4; Coulter, 1997: 276; Smyth, 2012: 134), signifying the loss of the power the Church held in the twentieth century. As a result, Ireland legally recognized same-sex marriage in 2015, and an abortion referendum in 2018 resulted in the repeal of the Eight Amendment of the Constitution, overturning the previous constitutional ban on abortion.[2] These referenda highlight the evolving landscape of civil rights and reproductive freedoms in Ireland.

Thus, *A History of Loneliness* shows "the new regime […] orchestrated by the media, [where] the greatest transgressors are those priests and religious brothers who have molested and abused young children" (Inglis, 2005: 32). In this vein, Tom Inglis states that

> not so long ago, the church and its clergy were considered to be sacred. People may have sinned, they may not have followed church teachings, but they did not openly

[2] For more on this, see Ralph (2020).

> challenge the church or its bishops and priests. However, the profanity of the scandals broke the sacred ring that protected the church. What was once unspoken is now being said. (2014: 138)

Indeed, this loss of power was also represented in the way the issue of Clerical Child Sexual Abuse (CCSA) was covered by the media and how priests were "depicted as self-serving masters of evil" (Donnelly and Inglis, 2010: 3). Catholics in Ireland lost much of the confidence they held in their Church, given that "Irish people are no longer as much dependent on priests and politicians and no longer see them as the great heroes in and saviours of their lives" (Inglis, 1998: 254). The respected image of priesthood in the past has become a shameful uniform and an unreliable figure for most people in the present. This change in balance is clearly seen in *A History of Loneliness*, especially in the way in which Odran—himself a priest—is treated by his fellow citizens from the 1980s to the 2000s. In fact, the novel shows not only the Church's influence in the country in the 1960s and 70s, but also Ireland's internationalization and consequent loss of faith in the Church.

3. Guilt, Shame, and *A History of Loneliness*

Boyne's *A History of Loneliness* is presented as almost an autobiography of its narrator and protagonist. More specifically, the term 'novel of recollections', coined by Petr Chalupský, refers to a specific type of ageing narratives which he describes thus:

> It is mostly a short novel narrated in the first person by an adult narrator who in his/her memories returns to his/her past—childhood, adolescence, student years—which he/she attempts to present to the reader […] as a comprehensive and indisputable sequence of objectively perceived and absolutely clearly recollected events. […] A serene recapitulation of long forgone events therefore transforms into a dramatic and often painful coming to terms not only with the past but also with the present and, along with that, with the immediate future, with other people's fates but, above all, with him/herself and his/her own conscience. (2016: 90)

Were it not for its length, it could be argued that Boyne's *A History of Loneliness* fits almost perfectly Chalupský's term. Indeed, the novel presents an aged narrator, Odran, driven by the guilt and shame of his past, trying to make amends in the present or at least to justify his actions and be able to live with himself the remaining years of his life. The narrator, then, speaks from a position of maturity and experience, and this retrospective strategy makes it appropriate to differentiate between two personas: the experienced self and the experiencing self; in other words, between narrator and character, respectively. Frank Zipfel argues in this regard that "normally there is a

difference in age between the two personas, and this difference can be the reason for further dissimilarities e.g. in experience, knowledge, moral attitudes, wishes or needs" (2011: 123). The narrative will be seen as a healing experience, as a necessary therapy to cure old wounds. His is a life review, which allows "subjects to optimize their life story through recognition, revision, and even disposal" (DeFalco, 2010: 25). In this same line, Rosario Arias Doblas states that "there exists the belief in the life review as a beneficial exercise of introspection, since the collection of memories will have a therapeutic effect on the ageing person, who can make amends, forgive and resist regret" (2005: 10). This is true for the protagonist of *A History of Loneliness*, whose narrative serves a double specific purpose: assuming one's guilt and asking for forgiveness as well as erasing shame and giving voice to what was once silenced. Besides, it also helps with the reconstruction of his own identity. According to David Jackson,

> most of us keep on telling stories, both to ourselves and others, about our embodied experiences, and the key transitions and critical turning points confronted in our life courses. Through these dynamic processes of re-ordering, selecting and re-assembling the random flux of our lives, we constitute an identity as aging men by shaping a narrative account of how we got to be the way that we are. (2016: 11-12)

The same view is shared by Margaret O'Neill and Michaela Schrage-Früh in their claim that "identity formation is closely bound with the continual reviewing of one's life story" (2020: 184). It is noticeable in this regard that Odran's narrative is distinctly chaotic, characterized by its back-and-forth structure, which seems to represent the narrator's state of mind and his internal turmoil. Episodes from his past intermingle with his present in a retrospective and introspective narrative that calls for the distinction made above between the perspective of narrator and character. As shall be explored below, Odran's narration is representative of who he is in his old age: a priest still today consumed by guilt and shame.

Regarding the former, "individuals may experience guilt when they believe that they have done something contrary to their code of conduct and/or when their actions have injured another" (Lee, Scragg, and Turner, 2001: 456). This way, narratives such as *A History of Loneliness* present guilty narrators who tend to shrink and turn to their inner selves, exploring their souls in an introspective and often confessional mode that might allow them to cope and live with their guilt. Along these lines, it could be argued that feeling guilty is a much stronger emotion than being guilty, since an individual might be unconsciously guilty, which would make the implications of guilt not applicable or irrelevant. Feeling guilty, therefore, might bring reactions such as "thinking that you shouldn't have done what you did", "feeling like undoing what you have done", "wanting to make up for what you've done wrong", and "wanting to be forgiven", among others (Roseman, Wiest, and Swartz, 1994: 215).

The concept of 'shame' is not as inward-looking as the concept of 'guilt', since shame is something felt against a background. In other words, shame implies "a disapproving audience" (Tangney et al., 1996: 1256) reproaching someone else's foolishness or stupidity and therefore alluding to the latter's sense of pride, among other things. Compared to guilt, shame requires at least two individuals—one to criticize the behaviour of the other. Along these lines, Johnson et al. argue that shame "results from the existence of a real or imagined audience (or observer) of one's misdeed, while guilt generally is defined as a feeling of negative self-regard associated with the real or imagined commission of an act, without any need for an audience" (1987: 359). As suggested before, guilt does not require an observer to disapprove of the self, whereas shame involves the implication of an audience. In the case of Boyne's novel, that audience will be Irish society as a whole, as shall be seen.[3]

Thus, Odran is this discontented priest, haunted by his silence. Throughout the confession that forms the novel, he delays the revelation of some key pieces of information, of which he is fully aware, in an attempt to disguise his guilt and shame. Silence is only possible in the novel because Odran's omniscient narrative perspective evinces another narratological strategy used by the author and narrator to foreground guilt and shame: retrospection. There are several moments in the novel when Odran both addresses his audience and admits that he is speaking from the future, with instances such as "and I look back at that night, more than a decade ago now" (Boyne, 2015: 31) or "now I ask you, what could I do but go over to him?" (2015: 233). At the point from which he is speaking, Odran knows how all the events turned out but still does not reveal them to the reader and waits for the precise moment, adding thus to the novel's suspense. Here lies the difference between *character-Odran*, the experiencing self, and *narrator-Odran*, the remembering or narrative self—in the quantity and quality of the knowledge they hold. The chapters recounting episodes from the past are mostly focused on Odran as a character/focalizer rather than as narrator, even if he interrupts the narrative from time to time to comment on the events themselves or on his memories of them: "I look back and am not sure why that was the case" (2015: 199). Those chapters dealing with his recent past are told from the advantageous perspective of the present, when Odran performs more significantly as narrator rather than merely as a character. In this sense, although narrator-Odran has full knowledge of all the events that character-Odran is experiencing, he still does not clarify some of their meanings. For instance, he claims in chapter two that "of course my job was taken off me before the year was up and a black mark put against my name that was impossible to wipe clean" (2015: 38), but it is not until chapter thirteen

[3] Shame in Ireland has been dealt with before, mainly related to the Magdalene Laundries (Fischer, 2016; Maher, 2016) and abortion laws in the country (Fischer, 2019).

that he is able to tell the full story. His withholding information quite regularly in the novel makes the reader question his reliability. Something similar is found in Odran's concealment of another episode in his childhood, namely his father's and brother's deaths: "When he told me that he was from Wexford, however, I felt a wound inside me opening once again, for I would never hear that county's name without an accompanying burst of grief" (2015: 47). Once again, he does not clarify for the reader the full meaning of his words, but he rather forces them to wait a few more chapters for more explanation. The aged character and narrator, therefore, chooses to disappear slightly but significantly, leaving the reader in the dark as to the development of the story much in the same way as character-Odran is himself, in order to put the reader and the protagonist in the same position.

Taking all this into account, the narrator's unreliability should be explored as a resourceful narratological tool used in *A History of Loneliness* to approach guilt and shame.[4] In the case of this novel, unreliability is to be found in the narrator's focalization of a character with a limited point of view, in this case with limited knowledge. Thus, in the greatest part of the novel, character-Odran is the focalizer, the perspective from which the story is told. His limited perspective is what causes unconscious unreliability, combined with narrator-Odran's conscious omission of the real events. In other words, even if Odran as narrator can be categorized as unreliable, it is mainly character-Odran, the focalizer, the one presenting the events in a more unreliable manner. The combination of the two makes the narration unreliable, especially in the 'past chapters' mentioned above. Character-Odran, then, would be unreliable in his misjudgements and misunderstandings. Although this unreliability would be so against the information that we, as readers, hold in hindsight and that character-Odran does not possess yet, he still misreads certain crucial situations and behaviours that clearly position him in the spectrum of unreliability. For instance, Odran seems to miss the hints thrown at him regarding Tom's suspicious behaviour with children, such as the fact that the boys in Tom's parish have nicknamed him Satan (2015: 50), that Tom's housekeeper tries to prevent him from being alone with a kid (2015: 288-90), the incident with Brian Kilduff (2015: 299-300), or Odran himself condemning Tom as a "sex maniac […]. He thinks about it morning, noon and night" (2015: 200). On the other hand, narrator-Odran is unreliable insofar as he does not correct his own past misconceptions as a character and thus leaves the narratee outside the real development of the events:

[4] For more on the figure of the unreliable narrator, see Booth (1991), Heyd (2006), A. Nünning (1997), V. Nünning (2015), Olson (2003), and Phelan and Martin (1999).

> When I told you that story earlier, when I told you about 1990, did I mention that I had reported what I had seen to Tom the next morning, who had called the Gardaí in? […] Perhaps I didn't. If I didn't, I should have. Anyway, here it is out in the open now. We are none of us innocent. (2015: 395)

Narrator-Odran is able to evaluate his knowledge of Tom's true character or lack thereof, but still does not admit the whole truth until the end. His unreliability (the necessary distinction between focalizer and narrator) comes from his feeling of guilt—he is not ready yet to admit to himself or his narratee his involvement in this particular episode, "because I did know what to think. Only I could not bring myself to think it" (2015: 299). He knew what it meant that Brian was vandalizing Tom's car, but still thought it best to report it to Tom and, consequently, to doom Brian to more personal interviews with the priest. In this regard, it could be argued that the narrator, who is recounting the story from a position of knowledge, is unable to reliably narrate the events of his past. Unreliability, together with his silences and his chaotic narration, is the technique the narrator uses in his attempt at justification, driven by his guilt and shame. He wants the reader to be as blind and deaf to certain events as he was, so that character-Odran cannot be blamed for something he has not been the only one to have missed. In a painful but powerful article, Irish writer John Banville claims that silence about sexual abuse was something shared by the whole nation, not by just a few individuals: "Never tell, never acknowledge, that was the unspoken watchword. Everyone knew, but no one said" (2009). As mentioned above, this was due to the all-controlling power of the Catholic Church, which ruled in Ireland from the 1930s to the 1990s. Banville concludes by claiming that "we knew, and did not know. That is our shame today" (2009). Along similar lines, Gerry Smyth acknowledges that "the existence of religious corruption and exploitation had been an open secret of Irish life for a long time" (2012: 134). As seen, silence is paramount in *A History of Loneliness*, since it is Odran's silence as a character that still haunts him and drives him to talk about it, as a means to free his soul.

It therefore seems necessary for Odran to have a listener—after all, for a life review to be therapeutic, the ageing person needs an audience (Arias Doblas, 2005: 10). However, it can be contended that he is not addressing anyone in particular. An aged Catholic priest, he just feels the urge to confess, to come to terms with his past and admit to what still haunts him—his implied reader might even be an entity he would call God. In this regard, Lee, Scragg, and Turner argue that "guilt-laden memories focus on a desire to confess wrongdoing (whether actual or imagined) in an attempt to make amends" (2001: 456). Similarly, Gershen Kaufman also asserts that "each individual must find a way to relieve the intolerable burden of guilt or shame by making peace within, by embracing the self once again, and thereby becoming

whole" (1996: 254). Telling his story may serve Odran the purpose of relieving his guilt, not only through confession but also by making someone else (the reader) understand the reasons why he did not speak out. Indeed, Odran's guilt resides in his inability to condemn the crimes taking place around him and hence his complicity in them. The most prominent feeling of guilt that Odran experiences is the recognition of his knowledge of Tom's and other priests' immoral behaviour and his failure to take action: "I had been complicit in all their crimes and people had suffered because of me. I had wasted my life. […] in my silence, I was just as guilty as the rest of them" (Boyne, 2015: 471). He also admits to having had some suspicions, but he simply could not believe that his best friend could be capable of such crimes.

One of the first moments in which Odran recognizes his passivity appears when he evokes the episode with Brian Kilduff and the slicing of Tom's tires:

> I got back to bed and didn't know what to think. But there's the lie. Because I did know what to think. Only I could not bring myself to think it. […] *And the guilt now, as I think of it. The guilt. The guilt, the guilt, the guilt.* […] It is so strong that there have been moments in recent years when I have wondered whether I should make my own way down there to Curracloe beach and let that be the end of the matter. (2015: 299-300, emphasis mine)

This passage seems to suggest that Odran's guilt appears afterwards, once the crimes have been unravelled, victims have spoken out and more fingers have pointed at Tom. At the moment of the occurrence, Odran knows what to think—which would not comply with what has been claimed before regarding his utter naïveté—but decides to remain silent perhaps because he is not fully aware of the consequences of Tom's actions, and even his own. Hence, it is in retrospect that he realizes the aftermath of the events he has been involved in and the implicature of his inaction and, therefore, that guilt arises.

Odran's guilt comes as a consequence of an external provocation and reminder of his involvement in the crimes. As O'Keefe points out, guilt "is the sort of emotional state that might straightforwardly be aroused by another person (by another person's raising objections)" (2000: 68). In this case, it is paradoxically his friend Tom, one of the abusers, who reminds Odran of his complicity in his crimes: "'Are you going to pretend that that's a surprise to you?' I looked away. I could not meet his eyes. Had there been a mirror in front of me, I would not have been able to meet my own" (Boyne, 2015: 325). Tom seems to be trying to hide his own involvement in Odran's inaction. By making Odran feel guiltier than—or at least as guilty as—himself, Tom might be trying to soften his own guilt, in an attempt to feel better with himself. Be it as it may, what is true is that Odran needs Tom to remind him that he is not as innocent

as he wants to appear. For, even if Odran knew that he had not acted wisely and correctly throughout most part of his life, he had successfully hidden those guilty or troubling thoughts at the back of his mind. He reaches a point of no return when he is forced to face his own demons and the testimony of a victim, who denounces at Tom's trial not only the convicted priests but also "the ones who stood by and did nothing" (2015: 387), which seems to point to Odran directly.

Apart from feeling guilty because of his inaction about the sexual abuse against children, his childhood is another site of guilt. Odran's alcoholic and depressed father, motivated by a desire for vengeance against his wife, drowns their youngest son in the Irish Sea, and then commits suicide. Odran's guilt for the incident stems from the fact that his father had asked him first to go for a swim. Had he not refused, he would have been the one drowning instead of his younger brother Cahal, and that is something that haunts him for the rest of his life: "I blamed myself for not accompanying my father when first asked" (2015: 290). This is known as survivor guilt, a term linked to PTSD and having to do with those individuals who feel guilty for having survived when others did not or for the things they had to do in order to survive, especially used for Holocaust or Hiroshima survivors (Murray, 2018: 600). In this case, Odran could be said to be suffering from survivor guilt since, in his mind, he was the one 'destined' to die along his father instead of his little brother. This is another episode of his life that narrator-Odran cannot fully recount, for it takes Odran a few chapters to recount the event in full and, when he does, he does not claim his shame as guilt, not until two hundred pages later.

Further, Odran also feels shame for the consequences of his actions in relation to his own sexuality, especially those that occurred during his one-year stay in Rome. Thus, Odran's recently discovered sexuality keeps him away from his duties and makes him miss important historical events. He was absent from his post when Pope Paul VI died and when the 263rd Pope was elected, due to his infatuation and obsession with an Italian waitress: "I feel shame that I was not there to see it, for of course it was a moment of history and I was caught up in more secular affairs" (2015: 273). As Eugene O'Brien argues, "Catholicism has generally seen desire, especially sexual desire, as a negative human quality in need of repression" (2018: 140), and so the Italian waitress is presented here as tempting Odran, who had been taught to repress any kind of sexual or passionate feeling and thus feels overwhelmed when he is utterly attracted to her. Odran seems to be fascinated by what the waitress represents, something that had always been banned from him, and that he had probably not faced before. Nevertheless, what Odran seems to be both guilty and ashamed of is not only his sexual desire, which he has been taught to abhor, but the consequences of not being at his post that day. In this sense, it also seems significant

that he is not ashamed of his own abusing behaviour, given that he stalks the waitress to the extent of following her home several nights, including breaking and entering her home once. In a way, it could be seen as one of Boyne's justifications for the inaction of the character—he perceives immorality neither in his own actions nor in others', and thus his silence can be excused.

All in all, *A History of Loneliness* presents a homodiegetic narrative that explores the concepts of guilt and shame in its protagonist and narrator. By using narratological devices such as the silences of the unreliable narrator or its chaotic structure, Odran is forced to face his guilt and shame with the ultimate objective of coming to terms with his past. The distinction between character/focalizer and narrator has shown the distance that Odran needs to take when dealing with his past, which evinces that he is still haunted by his actions (and inactions).

4. Conclusion

The recent history of Ireland is marked by the scandals of sexual abuse perpetrated by the Catholic Church for decades. Its revelation, along with the modernisation of the country, among other related issues, caused the progressive loss of power of the Church in Ireland, where it had ruled for many decades. It also caused loss of trust in Catholic priests by the population, not only in Ireland but in other countries where scandals of this sort have also been revealed of late.

John Boyne's *A History of Loneliness* tackles this issue with an unreliable narrator and character who is blind—or claims to be so—to the events taking place around him. As Odran is able to reveal in his old age and not earlier, he had more than mere suspicions about the fact that his friend, Tom, and other priests were abusing children, but he decided to keep silent and be complicit in their crimes. It is only as an old man that he is able to confess in an attempt to make amends and come to terms with his past and deal with his present. This also implies feelings of guilt and shame: guilt for his complicity in the cover-ups of the abuse and the knowledge that he could have saved children from being abused, and shame because of the perspective that the population has now of people like him.

Consequently, Odran is characterized by his passivity. He claims to be naïve and innocent, and indeed he is, but he is primarily a coward. He confesses late in life to his inaction and passivity, which still haunt him. Besides, his unreliability, together with his non-chronological narrative, suggest his chaotic state of mind and the impossibility of coming forward with the truth at the beginning of his story, for only as an old man has he achieved the necessary maturity to admit to the faults he has committed in the past. In other words, shame and guilt shape his narrative and make

it necessary to distinguish between narrator and character/focalizer, emphasizing the distinction between what the narrator knows and what he is able to admit.

A History of Loneliness is a perfect example of contemporary Irish literature tackling controversial historical issues affecting the entire world, for the novel could have been set in any other country where sexual abuse has unfortunately been frequent. By presenting the story from the point of view of the 'innocent' priest, however, the novel emphasizes the role of those who kept silent, who knew and decided to say nothing in order to maintain their personal tranquillity. As the character of Odran shows, this serenity cannot last for long, and it is in old age when past memories and regrets haunt us and force our most shameful confessions.

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