



TRABAJO DE FIN DE GRADO

IRISH MASCULINITIES IN DONAL RYAN'S *THE SPINNING HEART*

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Abstract

The field of masculinities has been thoroughly investigated in the last decade by scholars such as Connell (2005), Clare (2001), and Kimmel (2013), among others. In this sense, studies on masculinity are pertinent in the context of Ireland since its historical, cultural, and social background are decisive components in the construction of Irish male identities. In this context, Donal Ryan's *The Spinning Heart* reveals the severe implications that the Irish Economic recession in the 2000s had for rural men in Ireland. Accordingly, through close textual analysis of *The Spinning Heart* (2012), the present final-year project aims to expand on Irish men's behavioral relations in the 21st century to elucidate the models of masculinity and their gendered performative and discursive attitudes in speech. The findings of this study suggest that the models of masculinity portrayed in the novel fall far from the hegemonic model, revealing different patterns of violence, mental health issues, and household relationships, which could serve as material for further exploration of the field of masculinities in rural Ireland.

Keywords: *masculinity, gender, Ireland, The Spinning Heart, rural masculinities*

Resumen

El área de estudio de las masculinidades ha sido investigada en profundidad en la última década por académicos como Connell (2005), Clare (2001), Kimmel (2013), entre otros. Así, los estudios sobre masculinidad son pertinentes en el contexto de Irlanda dado que su trasfondo histórico, cultural y social son decisivos en la construcción de identidades masculinas irlandesas. En este contexto, *The Spinning Heart*, de Donal Ryan, revela las graves consecuencias que la crisis económica de los 2000 tuvo para los hombres de la Irlanda rural. En este sentido, a través de un análisis textual detallado de *The Spinning Heart* (2012), el presente Trabajo de Fin de Grado tiene por objeto profundizar en las relaciones de conducta de los hombres irlandeses en el siglo XXI para dilucidar los modelos de masculinidad y sus actitudes performativas y discursivas condicionadas por su género. Las conclusiones de este estudio sugieren que los modelos de masculinidad retratados en la novela se alejan del modelo hegemónico, y muestran diferentes patrones de violencia, problemas de salud mental y relaciones domésticas, que podrían servir como material para seguir profundizando en el estudio de las masculinidades en la Irlanda rural.

Palabras clave: *masculinidad, género, Irlanda, The Spinning Heart, masculinidades rurales*

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1. INTRODUCTION

In his novel of 2012, Donal Ryan wrote “Imagine being so suddenly useless” (Ryan, 2012, p. 22). Set during the 2008 economic recession, this sentence of *The Spinning Heart* epitomizes the general sense of confusion and hopelessness that Irish men felt during the crisis. Being bereft of purpose because of the lack of employment, the pressure of maintaining the household, together with the social transformation of the 19th- century Ireland would have consequences for the construction and development of masculinities in rural Ireland.

Thus, the aim of this end-of-year project is to explore the different models of masculinity that appear in Donal Ryan’s *The Spinning Heart*, in the context of the economic depression of the early 2000s with topics such as hypermasculinity, toxic masculinity, patriarchy, and Irish studies. In this sense, one of the main objectives is to analyze how factors such as violence, father and son relationships, and mental health issues in rural Ireland help in the development and in the expression of different models of masculinity.

Moreover, this final-year project is organized as follows: after this introduction, section 2 provides a literature review of the theory, literature, and research on masculinity and the background of Ireland. Besides, the literature review is divided into four sections that comprise an overview of gender and masculinity studies (section 2.1), a differentiation of the different types of masculinity (section 2.2), research on violence (section 2.3), and Irish masculinities (2.4) in which the main focus is the exploration of rural Irish masculinities. The research methodology of this final-year project is based on the investigations previously stated in the literature review in order to explore the different representations of masculinity in the novel through close reading. Then, section 3 offers a brief overview of Donal Ryan’s career and writing style, and a description of the novel and its characters. The next section (section 4) comprises the analysis of *The Spinning Heart*, which is centered on an exploration of the different types of violence that are portrayed in the novel, a study of the relationships between father and son as reflective of the socioeconomic and cultural background of rural Ireland, and an analysis of the different types of mental health issues represented in *The Spinning Heart*. Finally, section 5 summarizes the contributions, limitations of the present study, and future research, accompanied by the list of references used for this final-year project.

2. LITERARY REVIEW

2.1. GENDER AND MASCULINITY

The nineteenth century is an important landmark as to the implications of the political changes involving gender. The fight for women's suffrage and recognition in public spaces led the cause of feminism which represented a considerable threat to masculinity. According to Connell (2014, p. 191), "working-class women contested their economic dependence on men as the factory system evolved". Consequently, men would not only have to share public space and dominance with other men but using De Beauvoir's term, with "the second-sex," that is, with women. As De Beauvoir explained (1949, p. 32), women's emancipation "becomes a real threat; even within the working class, men tried to thwart women's liberation because women were becoming dangerous competitors—especially as women were used to working for low salaries". Additionally, this was a menace to the system and the laws that safeguarded their inviolable status and interests and established their absolute power.

In this context, it is also important to consider the new restrictions that resurge in this century due to the passing of laws that criminalized homosexuality. As stated by Connell (2014, p. 196) because of laws such as "gross indecency" in the 1885 Labouchere Amendment in England, "heterosexuality became a required part of manliness". The advent and recognition of gay communities made it now necessary for heterosexual men to establish a double hierarchy: not only over women but also over men who were not "as manly" due to their sexuality. Until that moment "natural laws" had established the patterned relationship "male-female". Thus, this discrimination is, again, rooted in a misogynistic assessment, because what they reject is, among other aspects, the fact that as women, they are attracted to men. Consequently, the restrictions to what was considered to be a man became even more reduced, and with it, the pressure increased, and the limits became even tighter. Eventually, these factors would lead to the exaltation of hypermasculinity.

The system upon which masculine traits are established is based on a list of requirements that men must follow or be identified with to belong to it. These requisites include sexuality (heterosexuality), race, ethnicity, class, religion, body appearance, rationality over emotionality, and the primacy of work over family, amongst other indexicalities. Failure to do so results in their inevitable social or institutional exclusion from the group. As a matter of fact, as Connell (2014, p. 79) illustrates, the process of

oppression of homosexual masculinities “is marked by a rich vocabulary of abuse: wimp, milksop, nerd, turkey, sissy, lily liver, jellyfish, yellowbelly, candy ass, ladyfinger, pushover, cookie pusher, cream puff, motherfucker, [...] mother’s boy, four-eyes, ear-‘ole, dweeb, geek, Milquetoast, Cedric, and so on”. This list of gendered insults functions as a portrayal of the historical symbolic association of weakness, ineptness, and ignorance with femininity. By drawing a parallelism between the insulted men and femininity, another degree of categorization may be implied, that is: the undermining of maleness as being compared with “the second sex”. This fact reinforces the theory that the inherent motivation of male-to-male denigration is, indeed, an intrinsic misogynistic force.

Additionally, the masculinizing process begins in the family context. As Connell (2014, p. 166) reflects, historically “[a]n employed father claimed authority in the family, and a housebound mother did the child care and managed the family’s emotional life”. Rational and emotional now separated, the child would accommodate his behavior to fit in the dynamics of gender dichotomy. By extension, in the workplace, men also participate in relationships based on rivalry, competition, and sacrifice which strengthen the impact of the behavioral patterns learned during childhood and adolescence. Simultaneously, this is reflected in the parental approaches of men. As Kimmel (2013, p. 148) elucidates in his analysis of white masculinity in an American context:

The set of attitudes and traits that is most closely associated with masculinity—robotic stoicism, competition, aggression—are those that contradict most with the qualities needed to be a good parent: patience, nurturing, emotional resilience. In that sense, men who seek to be really involved fathers have to choose between fatherhood and masculinity.

Thus, the inevitable outcome is the endless reproduction of the described dynamics which is, as Kimmel (2013, p. 26) states: “an ideology that promises unparalleled acquisition coupled with a tragically impoverished emotional intelligence”.

However, as a result of feminist movements, the recognition of homosexuality and civil rights in European countries, the 1960s has been regarded as a decade of transition in the construction of manhood. This phenomenon was first studied by McGovern (1966), Levant, Hirsch, Celentano, and Cozza (1992), and Dubbert (1997). These authors have regarded this crisis as a response that arises from the unsustainability of the established strict gender roles and the separation of modern and traditional life that

established the primacy of manhood. Later, authors such as Clare (2001) concluded that the importance that work had for the distinction and definition of men could not be longer used to be distinguished from women. Thus, all these social and economic factors together debunked some of the societal expectations of being a man which, in the context of Ireland, would be of the utmost importance in the development of a crisis of identity which is portrayed in *The Spinning Heart* (2012) and further explored in the following sections of this final-year project.

Hence, now that I have delved into gender theory and how hegemonic masculinity encapsulates the ideal identity for men to achieve, I will move on to the study of the different models of masculinity in the next section.

2.2. MODELS OF MASCULINITY

Over time, historical processes are responsible for the construction of masculinity and femininity in its various types. This section explores Connell's four models of masculinity as part of the theoretical framework of this final-year project. Based on the relationship between men, Connell differentiates between (1) hegemonic, (2) subordinated, (3) complicit, and (4) marginalized masculinities.

As to (1) hegemonic masculinities, it is important to bear in mind that the concept of hegemony does not imply standardization but an archetype that far from being inclusive, restricts the scope of the definition of masculinity. The concept of "hegemony" in itself refers to "the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life" (Connell, 2014, p. 15). As to the construction of social hierarchy, the imbalanced relationship between its classes allows for the perpetuation of the dynamics of the system. In this structure, hegemonic masculinity holds the dominant status. This leading position is granted through a social and institutional system that promotes cultural differences: patriarchy. In its configuration, a patriarchal society posits that the existence of dominance implies a counterpart: subordination. It is in this end of the spectrum that the issue of gender and identity can be found and therefore, cannot be ignored. In the context of a society that endorses disparity, the concept of masculinity emerges as a social necessity to be differentiated from what was considered to be its opposite. In other words, masculinity is defined by the rejection of femininity, as mentioned above with the use of feminized insults. Likewise, the concept of hegemonic masculinity is essential in the recognition of the unequal distribution of power within not

only the gender-based dichotomic spectrum but also within masculinities (Cronin, 2014). As Carrigan, Connell, and Lee (1985, p. 592) reflect “[t]here is a distance, and a tension, between collective ideal and actual lives”. In this sense, the evident consequence is the identification of other forms of masculinity which represent a larger number of men.

As a matter of fact, the existence of hegemonic masculinity implies the (2) subordination of groups of men. According to Connell (1995), homosexuality has been established as a recognized target and has become a subordinated form of masculinity. In his view, this type of masculinity is rooted in the misogynistic rejection of femininity, which comprises behavioral patterns, such as empathy, emotionality over rationality, and sexual appeal. The exclusion that men pertaining to this group face extends to being “dismissed as public-school teachers, for instance, or erode court protection for civil liberties” (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985, p. 594). Additionally, further evidence of this subordination could be the fact that conjugal households that fit into the hegemonic pattern of heterosexuality benefit from the government’s established tax concessions or welfare rules.

The third type of masculinity listed above is that of (3) complicit masculinity, which is defined as the type of masculinity that even when unable to access power, is aware of the imbalanced relationships that exist within the system and profits from them, thus, sustaining and supporting the dominance of hegemonic masculinity. The profit is not a product of the privileges of hegemonic masculinity but rather the success of not being perceived or treated as marginalized or subordinated masculinity. A simple but illustrating example of this type of masculinity is provided in Kahn’s *An Introduction to Masculinity* (2009, p. 35):

In the seventh grade, a friend of mine told me a story that is a great example of complicit masculinity. The walls of his room were covered with posters of male heavy metal artists. One day as he sat in his room, his father came in. His father began to chastise him for having pictures of men all over his walls and began calling him derogatory and heterosexist names (i.e., What are you, gay? A faggot?) in order to emphasize that it was not acceptable to hang posters of men in his room. Soon after this incident, my friend ordered a Playboy calendar poster that featured mini-photos of the Playmate models from the previous year, and hung them on his wall. The next time his father came into his room, he congratulated my friend for this choice.

As Kahn (2009) explains, the boy, coerced by his father in an attempt to avoid further humiliation, submits to masculinity. By participating in the objectification of women “[t]his young man would not likely (both due to age and other characteristics) be able to achieve many direct benefits of dominant masculinity, but he could benefit from it through complying with a more dominant male's wishes, even at a cost to others and himself” (Kahn, 2009, p. 35). From this evidence, it could be argued that complicit masculinity “aims at silencing and subordinating others as the hegemonic group imposes a set of rules granted with political legitimacy that are expected to be obeyed” (Gómez, 2007, p. 119).

Finally, (4) marginalized masculinity involves the ostracizing of some groups of men due to their ethnic origin or belonging to a class group. Due to their exclusion, access to power is denied. Some instances of men that fall into this group comprise indigenous tribes in Latin America, African immigrants in Europe, or black minorities in the United States. Regarding racialized masculinities, for example, Connell (1995, p. 80) establishes that “[i]n a white-supremacist context, black masculinities play symbolic roles for white gender construction”. Men who are enclosed in this type of masculinity suffer the oppressive and unjust tyranny of hegemonic masculinity. However, either by lack of resources or alienation, they do not question or distance themselves from those repressive mores. Apart from black masculinities, other racialized identities included in this model encompass Asian men, and people belonging to the LGBTQ+ community. In the context of Ireland, for Cronin (2014), modern masculinity is immersed in an internal contradiction: “the ongoing tension between homosexuality and heterosexuality, and the desire for an authentic experience of masculinity within late capitalism – a desire that is impossible, and predicated on devaluing the feminine as inauthentic” (2014, p. 16).

More on violence and how it interacts within the different models of masculinity presented in this section will be discussed in the following module 2.3.

2.3. VIOLENCE

The historical association of masculinity and violence has been studied by numerous scholars from the 19th century to the 21st century (Lewis, 1983; Jefferson, 1997; Spierenburg, 1998; Clare, 2001; Hall, 2002; Connell, 2002). Violence has been understood as a reactionary mechanism of social control and a gendered feature. In this sense Clare (2001) affirms that the assumed relationship between testosterone levels and

violence is not that clear, since research findings demonstrate that testosterone is linked to dominance rather than to aggression and violence. Thus, this suggests that in the construction of abusive male behaviors other factors need to be taken into consideration.

In the performance of violence, Levant et al., (1992), Feder, Levant, and Dean, (2010), Kimmel, (2013), and Eibach (2016) explain that exposure to both physical violence and emotional and psychological violence are significant factors in the perpetration of violence. Kimmel (2013) states that masculine violence is perceived as a legitimized and admired response to a perceived humiliation. In the adolescent cohort, according to Feder, Levant, and Dean (2010, p. 386) factors such as the “availability of weapons, influence of violence-infused media, teasing and bullying, family circumstances, and learning problems” are decisive factors for youth violence enactments. Indeed, in early childhood and adolescence, male social interactions engage in rituals for proving manliness, seeking group membership and acceptance. As they suggested:

the socialization of boys to conform to traditional notions of masculinity such as toughness, aggression, dominance, and the restriction of emotional expression may heighten the potential for boys to engage in violence. This is thought to occur through the emotion socialization process by which boys’ sense of vulnerability is discouraged, suppressed, and punished (Feder et. al., 2010, p. 6).

In this regard, other authors such as Tannen (2013) advocated that gender relations are constructed on a parent-child complex, from which boys learn that any expression aimed at the claim of authority functions as an assertive tool to enhance their masculinity. In this sense, both public and private spheres are decisive in the boy’s acquisition of behaviors that endorse violence as part of the male construction and portrayal of identity. Thus, owing to the significance of violence in male socialization, different types of violence will be explored in this section for the purpose of further analysis.

Due to the lack of academic categorization of violence, the differentiation of the types of violence explained in this section has been retrieved from the official website of the Government of Labrador and Newfoundland (2018). Accordingly, nine varieties can be distinguished: (1) “Physical violence” includes “beating, burning, kicking, punching, biting, maiming or killing, or the use of objects or weapons;” (2) “Verbal abuse” is referred as to the verbalized attacks that ridicule or threatens a person’s integrity; (3)

“Emotional violence” involves the downgrading and disregard of a person through practices such as destroying possessions, using silent treatment, abandon threats; (4) “Psychological violence” is related to emotional abuse and it involves a range of subjection methods intending to reach a dominant position. This normally results in distressed emotions and traumatic experiences. Some examples of psychological abuse may include bullying, gaslighting, threatening behaviors, conscious isolation of someone, or ignorance; (5) “Sexual violence” is physical abuse of power that involves non-consensual sexual acts and the violation of the physical integrity of a person; (6) “Spiritual violence” occurs when a person religious beliefs are used against the person with the purpose of manipulation or domination (7) “Cultural violence” is connected to spiritual abuse when it involves tradition and culture; (8) “Socio-economic violence” is a category of institutionalized violence that includes practices such as depriving people (normally women) from their salaries, or prohibit the separation of income in the marriage context; (9) Finally, “neglect” is a type of violence which entails a failure to face the responsibility of providing protection to someone that person should. Examples comprise cases of physical neglect, such as abandonment and failure to provide shelter, nutrition, and cleanness; and medical neglect, that is, not providing the needed medication and assistance, or misreporting of medical conditions.

Due to the importance of violence in the socioeconomic and historical context of Donal Ryan’s *The Spinning Heart* (2012), the analysis section of this final-year project explores the renditions of voiced violence and voiceless violence. The term voiced violence alludes to the uttered or verbalized speech that entails abusive or violent connotations, whereas voiceless violence refers to the type of violence that in the novel is expressed through internal monologue most of the time. Thus, due to the importance of violence in the novel, its exploration in this final-year project will be analyzed bearing in mind that, “[i]n addition to identifying a set of common factors relevant to most (if not all) forms of violence, it also is important to understand unique factors that explain why some people engage in particular types of violence but not others” (Grych & Swan, 2012, p. 108).

2.4. IRISH MASCULINITIES

In the 20th century, Ireland is divided from Great Britain. The independence movement that preceded this event was led by writers, journalists, and poets such as W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and J. M. Synge. This group of writers decided to revive ancient Irish history and mythology which turned into a literary movement entitled the Irish Renaissance. As Kiberd puts it: “What makes the Irish Renaissance such a fascinating case is the knowledge that the cultural revival preceded and, in many ways, enabled the political revolution that followed” (1995, p. 21). The reason why Ireland became associated with a masculine hero like Cúchulainn was to separate their Irish identity from that of the English, and therefore their colonizing country. The figure of Cúchulainn comes from Celtic mythology as a warrior superhero, who is occasionally romanticized in novels like Lady Gregory’s *Cúchulainn of Muirthemne* (1902) and is considered the ideal hypermasculine figure the soldiers in the 1920s aspired to become in their liberation of Mother Ireland (Valente, 2011).

After centuries of isolation, poverty, disregard, and indifference, the last decade of 20th-century Ireland made the country an ideal economic model within and beyond Europe (Persson, 2021, p. 21). The most part of the 20th century in Ireland was marked by a reluctance to change and a wish to remain as a country with an economic system that relied almost solely on agriculture and farming. Nevertheless, these conservative policies changed when “the unions agreed to six successive pay deals to keep the wages down and thus stimulate investment for the benefit of the Irish economy” (Persson, 2021, p. 24). As stated by Kitchin et al., (2010, p. 6), “the Celtic Tiger was the outcome of a complex set of unfolding, interconnected, often serendipitous processes, held together by a strategy of seeking to attract and service foreign direct investment”. Other authors that have studied the Celtic Tiger like O’Toole (2003, p. 25) established that this terminology references “Asian tiger economies, suggesting that Ireland’s economy was among the strongest in the world”.

One of the outcomes of the Irish independence and literary revival was the growth in confidence of Irish people, a new identity was forged, as men felt they had something to be related with. As Woods stated:

With the rise of the Celtic Tiger and its championing of a neoliberal economic model and agenda, Irish masculinity became increasingly defined by the acquisition and display of affluence; though still bound up with aggressive risk-taking and bravado, such energies were to be channelled into the pursuit of wealth and the accumulation of consumer goods, through which identity is constructed and affirmed (Woods, 2014, p. 29).

Based on the privatization of public services, clientelism, and lack of regulation (Kitchin et al., 2010, pp. 5-6), the logical consequence of this economic process was the emergence of the 2008 Irish property bubble and a financial crisis, which are reflected in *The Spinning Heart* (2012), the novel at study. The consequences of the crisis extended from the abandonment of housing projects and the emergence of “ghost-states,” to the loss of the foundations of a new culture that was growing in hope due to the confidence that employment provided individually and collectively to Ireland. This socio-historical background is key for the context in which *The Spinning Heart* is set. The consequences of the Celtic Tiger are determinant in the construction and portrayal of both masculine and female figures in the novel. As will be analyzed in following sections of this final-year project, this will be linked to depression and mental issues derived from an incapability to manage their emotions and cope with frustration.

2.4.1. Rural Irish masculinities

The geography and climatic characteristics of Ireland make the country an ideal land for agriculture. Indeed, according to the “Environmental Protection Agency,” agriculture represented 65.7% of the national land cover in 2018 (Environmental Protection Agency, 2023) the majority of the workforce production. As a result, the Irish economy has depended on it for centuries, and has regarded farming as a valuable tool for economic sustainability and independence.

From a social perspective, farming in Ireland has been historically considered an occupation for the men of a family. This association with masculinity roots back to the clash between public and private spaces of dominance, and to the almost primitive public demonstration of strength and dominance of the natural world. As Ní Laoire expresses “the ideal and hegemonic Irish masculinity has been constructed as heterosexual, a good family man, and a male breadwinner, in opposition to the ideal female roles of mother and domestic servant” (Ní Laoire, 2005, p. 342). The gendered stratification and portrayal

of manhood acts in this sector have important consequences for the construction of male identities. Accordingly, traditional rural masculinities in Ireland are entrenched through an intense sense of family hood, land ownership, and morality which entails prestige and respect not only in the family context but also in the community. As Ní Laoire elucidates: “[c]onventional farming masculinities involve constructions of the farmer as a hard worker battling against environmental and economic obstacles and exerting 'his' authority over the natural landscape” (2005, p. 335). Thus, through agriculture, men do not only fulfill their social role as “breadwinners” but a condition that allows them to display a set of masculine traits that rely on gender norms, and thus, it functions as a tool to assert their male identity. Additionally, since farming was a masculine occupation, landownership was reduced to the male leader of the household. Hence, the position and status conferred by the possession of land entailed an economic power and status that would come into confrontation with the duties it demanded. In its outlining, Ní Laoire (2005) differentiates between two types of responsibilities: the breadwinner and the custodian of the family farm. First, the breadwinner’s responsibility is based on the societal expectation of the man who, through work, generates income to sustain the household economy. Accordingly, Ní Laoire (2005) suggests “the ideal and hegemonic Irish masculinity has been constructed as heterosexual, a good family man, and a male breadwinner, in opposition to the ideal female roles of mother and domestic servant” (ibid., p. 242); Secondly, the custodian of family farm refers to the situation that Irish rural men have to face as landowners. Land transfer implied a moral imposition on them to work and maintain the land.

The anxieties and pressure that Irish rural men felt for the maintenance of their household, community, and future generations would be heightened because of unemployment. Due to the inner association of rural Irish men with work, the psychological consequences of unemployment would not only affect their sense of identity and self-esteem but also their livelihood and purpose in life. This lack of work, together with agricultural rationalization and massive emigration would end in a collective crisis of identity that, as Connell puts it: “will always implicate masculinities, though not necessarily by disrupting them” (1995, p. 84).

Because of the hierarchical land transfer within families from father to son, there is also a struggle in the relationship between family members. As a consequence, the reality is twofold, the first involves the ideal and traditional fatherhood identity that provides for the family both an authoritative but loving figure and the means for thriving

(Ní Laoire, 2005). Secondly, the reality shows that the land is not as fruitful as before. Thus, as young farmers face the consequences of the exploitation of the land by their fathers, they do not want to inherit it. This creates tensions and strain between fathers and sons as is portrayed in Donal Ryan's *The Spinning Heart*. In this novel, the protagonist, Bobby, illustrates the tensions resulting from the relationship with his father, Frank, as will be shown in the analysis section. Furthermore, mental health issues are becoming nowadays more and more relevant, but previous generations did not consider this a factor in their interpersonal relationships. The anxieties and tensions produced by the evolution of gender roles, unemployment, and lack of mental health assistance resulted in high rates of suicide in Irish rural communities, especially among men (Ní Laoire, 2005), but I will delve into this in the following sections.

3. DONAL RYAN'S *THE SPINNING HEART* (2012)

3.1. DONAL RYAN

Donal Ryan was born in 1976, in Nenagh, Co. Tipperary. He graduated in law at the University of Limerick where he teaches Creative Writing at present. His first steps in his literary career were not easy. After being rejected several times by different publishing companies, it was not until 2014 that Ryan could devote himself to his career as a writer (Tobar, 2013). In a course of ten years, he has published six novels: *The Spinning Heart* (2012), *The Thing About December* (2013), *All We Shall Know* (2016), *From a Low and Quiet Sea* (2018), and *Strange Flowers* (2020); and one short story collection: *A Slanting of the Sun: Stories* (2015).

In his novels, he draws inspiration from his life experiences and Irish lore to offer fictional but realistic descriptions of the predominant Irish conundrums, which tend to be essential in the plot. Furthermore, other sources that have influenced his writing are regional Limerick authors such as Gerry Stembridge, Kevin Barry, Paul Lynch, Roisin Meaney, and Frank McCourt, who, as stated by Ryan himself, is the reason why he is a writer (Dugdale, 2016). Additionally, other writers such as J. M. Synge and James Joyce have also served as role models for his literary creations, mostly in the creative process of designing the plot of his novels, as will be further explained in this section. In this sense, Donal Ryan has been acclaimed by critics such as Jordan (2018) who describes Ryan's writing as able to "draw speech out of the deepest silences" and be the testimony of his characters. Critics like Kappala-Ramsamy (2018) state that what defines Ryan's style is its perceptiveness, intimacy, and dark comedy. Additionally, his novels are mostly written in vernacular form, being truthful to the daily speech and dialectal forms of Irish English. As a matter of fact, his novel *The Spinning Heart* is written in demotic, readers can find several examples of variant grammatical forms such as the use of the "after perfect";¹ the use of the pragmatic discourse marker "like" in initial and final position; the use of "Habitual do be," or the use of embedded questions, all of which are features that characterize variation in Irish English (Kallen, 2013; Hickey, 2007). It is for his gift

¹ The grammatical variant "after perfect" is formed by the use of the verb *to be*, the preposition *after* and the present participle of the verb (i.e. verb + -ing). It replaces the standard use of the present perfect tense in English. E.g. "As if I was after asking for a gold toilet" (Ryan, 2012, p. 58) for the standard "As I have just asked for a gold toilet".

in writing and ability to create realistic stories, among other reasons, that Ryan has received eight literary awards, among which are the European Union Prize for Literature, The Guardian First Book Award, and four Irish Book Awards (*Donal Ryan - Irish Book Awards*, 2021).

3.2. THE NOVEL

The Spinning Heart is Donal Ryan's first published novel in 2012. This piece of fiction chronicles the aftermath of the Celtic Tiger recession and the inevitable consequences it entailed for the rural Irish community after the economic collapse of 2008. The story unfolds through twenty-one chapters which are narrated by twenty-one different characters who give voice to their inner thoughts. The polyphonic nature of the novel provides the reader with a multifaceted and broad description of the background of *The Spinning Heart's* rural Ireland. Indeed, the plot revolves around the consequences of the Irish economic recession which extends from feelings of loss and grief to mental illnesses, the struggle between public persona and inner desires, familial detachment, and poverty, to name a few.

The Spinning Heart has been highly acclaimed and awarded. Critics such as Walton (2013) have praised the novel because of its faithful depiction of Post Celtic Tiger rural Ireland and because its confessional style has allowed Irish readers feel identified with the narration and because it “provides a jolting yet unforced reminder of how hugely — and how weirdly — the west of Ireland has changed over the past decades” (Walton, 2013). Additionally, *The Spinning Heart* won the Irish Book Award for the Newcomer of the Year and Book of the Year in 2012. Then, in 2013, it was awarded the Guardian First Book Award, shortlisted for the International Dublin Literary Award in 2014, and awarded the European Union Prize for Literature (Ireland) in 2015.

In *The Spinning Heart*, as Persson (2021, p.32) suggests “[t]hrough the different narratives, it becomes clear that despite the improved financial situation for many during the Celtic Tiger, several characters express a variety of problems and limited well-being, frequently linked to societal pressures”. As will be explored in the next sections of this final-year project, men believed that their strength and value were rooted in their occupation. Thus, the economic recession that Ireland faced from 2008 onwards, together with the influence of feminism, and the extending visibility of LGBTQ+ communities that had taken place from the 1990s in Ireland, resulted in an unprecedented increase in

the vulnerability that Irish men felt, as explained in previous sections. The resulting sociopolitical and economic panorama would lead to a crisis of masculinity. Men no longer had all the resources they were granted before, and because of unemployment and reduced significance in the household, they had no place to fulfill their need to be recognized. These aforementioned feelings will be explored in the different characters presented in the novel in the following section.

3.3. CHARACTERS

In the creative process of writing, Ryan decided to create a piece of fiction in which, through the voice and chronicle of each of the character's experiences, a sense of community and interconnectedness would be created. In *The Spinning Heart*, most of the characters of the novel are male. Due to the confessional nature of the narrative, the accounts of the rural men in *The Spinning Heart*'s create a sense of loss of identity and confidence in a secure future. Indeed, as a consequence of the economic recession of 2008 in Ireland, in the story, Bobby, Frank, Josie, Timmy, Brian, Trevor, Jason, Seanie, Rory, Denis, Jim, Bernie, and Pokey Burke expose a wide range of personal and societal dilemmas such as anger issues, alcoholism, mental health problems, and reduced emotional management that provide a solid basis for the study of the masculinities illustrated in the novel. Although all the characters in *The Spinning Heart* share their unique experience and express their thoughts, among the twenty-one characters, Bobby could be considered the protagonist of the story. Most of the characters refer to Bobby at some point in their narratives, mostly because, as he is described as a gold-hearted, hard-working, selfless, helpful, caring, and trustworthy person, he comprises model moral values which make him a respectful figure for the rest of the community. Furthermore, the fact that he becomes suspect for the murder of his father, Frank, enhances the importance of this character in the story as well as adds a touch of mystery to the plot. Bobby is a character who, in the context of the Irish economic recession of 2008, suffers the consequences of unemployment and the property bubble. In *The Spinning Heart* community, this crisis is expressed when the head of the construction group, Pokey Burke, departs from the town leaving the housing projects unfinished, taking with him the pensions of the building crew. Bobby, as a worker in the construction sector, is not only affected by the economic recession but also represents the father-son tensions from the period. Both Bobby and his mother had been verbally abused by his father, Frank.

This atmosphere of violence and the fact that Bobby's mother dies will be decisive for the construction of Bobby's identity and tormenting relationship with Frank.

Furthermore, the women in the novel include Lily, Réaltín, Hillary, Kate, Mags, and Triona, who offer a description of how society and the recession have an impact on them. As with men, in *The Spinning Heart*, each female character displays a distinctive set of topics and concerns. Most importantly, the role of women in portraying the reality of the lives of the people of *The Spinning Heart* is paramount since through their accounts readers are provided with a wider and more detailed perspective of the relationships of the characters, as it is the case for Bobby and Frank. For instance, through Lily's voice, it is revealed that she is extremely cosified, and a victim of gender violence. As will be analyzed in the following sections of this final-year project, Lily provides a valuable account of the reality of rural women the 20th century Ireland and their relationship with men. In addition, through Mags, readers can also recognize the sphere of oppression, restriction, and rejection of homosexuality both in the family and societal contexts. At home, she narrates her father's disappointment when acknowledging that she was a lesbian, the outrage that followed after her confession, and the "disappointment when that vision isn't realized can manifest itself in anger". In the public sphere, she wonders if "Ger and [her] could, if [they] wished, give [themselves] the same standing in law as heterosexual couples" (Ryan, 2012, p. 178). More on these characters will be expanded upon in the analysis section.

4. ANALYSIS OF *THE SPINNING HEART* (2012)

The analysis section of this final-year project comprises three subsections being that of the study of violence (section 4.1), the exploration of father and son relationships (section 4.2), and the drawing of mental health issues (section 4.3), as portrayed in the novel.

4.1. VIOLENCE: VOICED AND VOICELESS

The first section of the analysis explores the presence and performance of violence in the novel. For the purpose of this analysis, the study of violence in *The Spinning Heart* is based on the differentiation between voiced and voiceless violence as explained in section 2.3. Voiced violence refers to verbalized abuse, uttered in direct speech, or directed against another person, whereas voiceless violence is defined as the commissive purpose or intention to engage in violent acts in the mind of the speakers (Clare, 2001; Eibach, 2016). The reason for this differentiation is rooted in the fact that in the novel there is an impending sense of hostility that is not only portrayed in the characters by the narration of their acts and words but also by their thoughts.

4.1.1. Voiced violence

The performance of voiced violence in *The Spinning Heart* adopts different forms. In the novel, it is possible to identify cases of voiced physical violence, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, emotional and psychological abuse, and neglect. As to physical violence, through Bobby's words, readers are exposed to several instances of this type of abusive behavior. As stated by scholars such as Adler (2003) and Wood (2007) the use of physical violence from men of the modern era is a response to a feeling of menace that is exacerbated when socioeconomic conditions such as education, regular income, or employment cannot be provided. Accordingly, due to the socioeconomic situation in the community of the novel, men show frustration and anger through violence as exemplified in (1) when Bobby says:

- (1) Mickey roared and roared. I want my fuckin pension and the rest of my stamps. Come out you bollocks till I kill you. For a finish he went on a rampage around the place, turning over barrows and pulling formwork apart and when he picked up a shovel and started swinging, we all ran for cover. Except poor innocent Timmy Hanrahan: he only stood grinning back to his two ears like the gom that he is [...]. Then we left him out and we all dragged crying, bleeding Timmy up the road to Ciss's and fed him pints for the evening. Mickey Briars softened his Jameson with tears and told Timmy he was sorry, he was always fond of him, he was a grand boy so he was, it was only that he thought he was laughing at him (Ryan, 2012, p. 10).

This excerpt may not only be indicative of Mickey Briars' inclination to physical violence as a response to the tension generated by the disastrous economic situation and the lack of his stamps but of the lack of dialoguing resources and the automatic response with violence to any harm he could feel, in this case, humiliation by laughing.

Another instance of physical violence can be found in Bobby's recollection of how a boy from the village excelled at one of the school essays and was battered all the way back home (Ryan, 2012, p. 13). In the community of *The Spinning Heart*, it is possible to find several instances in which boys are beaten because of achieving good grades. As a matter of fact, Bobby admits that he "couldn't ever let on I knew anything, though, that would have been suicide in my gang. I did pass maths [sic] even though I know I could have done honours. I never opened my mouth in English" (Ryan, 2012, p. 13); and Frank, when he admits having been heavily beaten by his father because he thought that being proud of grades was a deadly sin (Ryan, 2012, p. 195). These examples are suggestive of the perpetuation of gender roles in the novel. Bobby and Frank reflect how both society and education in the household punished them for either getting good grades or showing intellectual abilities. As suggested in sections 2.1 and 2.2 of this final-year project, the norms and roles associated with gender have long-established segregation between male and female activities. Accordingly, the male spectrum of activity would concern physical effort and the female one would involve more intellectual activities. Besides, this disparity is particularly heightened in a rural society that establishes the primacy of manual work as the basis of its economy embodied by a male figure. The events illustrated in these examples would have consequences for Frank and this will be reflected in his behavior as a father. More on Frank can be found in section

4.2 as it delves into the relationship of fathers and sons as portrayed in *The Spinning Heart*.

Another form of violence portrayed in the novel is that of murder. Although, as will be analyzed in the module on voiceless violence, assassination thoughts prevail among the masculine characters of *The Spinning Heart*, Denis is the only one who acts and kills Frank. In his mind, violent thoughts about inflicting pain on others are repeated within his narration. As a matter of fact, before he kills Frank, he expresses his desire to drive over a boy in the street (Ryan, 2012, p. 101). Furthermore, the motivation behind going to Frank's house was because as he expresses: "I wanted the father to know his son fraternized with rats. I wanted to frighten him. I wanted to frighten someone, anyone, so I wouldn't be the only one feeling this way" (Ryan, 2012, p. 103). This particular confession is very revealing of Denis' personality, as will be explored in sections 4.2 and 4.3.

As to sexual violence, the novel reveals several cases of abuse through the chapters of Lily, Josie, Trevor, and Seanie. In his account, Josie admits having tried to force a woman (Ryan, 2012, p. 21) who later on is revealed to be Lily. As explained in previous sections, Lily is an extremely cosified woman whose account represents the imbalanced relationship between women and men in rural Ireland. In her chapter, she narrates the first time she was sexually abused and the numerous times she has been brutally beaten by men. She was battered twice by one of the fathers of her children, Bernie McDermott. Bernie portrays four types of violence against Lily. Not only does he beat Lily but also insults her by calling her "stupid bitch" (Ryan, 2012, p. 38) which is considered emotional violence. Bernie mistreats her psychologically by threatening to kill her, and by beating her son, which is considered "vicarious violence".² Then, he also denies taking care and providing for his son, which is considered neglect, as explained in section 2.3. Nevertheless, Lily is not able to classify these events as abusive because she considers those types of behaviors natural to men, as illustrated in example (2):

- (2) I'd never blame a man for calling to me. Men have to do what they have to do. Nature overpowers them (Ryan, 2012, p. 39).

² Vicarious violence is defined in article 4.2 section *h* of Law 5/2008 in Spain as: "any type of violence exercised against sons and daughters with the purpose of causing psychological damage to the mother". Retrieved from <https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-2008-9294#a4>

Lily's voice could be considered a reflection of the sense of alienation that rural women in Ireland are subject to with regard to rights and sexual education. As stated by Kandi et al., (2022), among the numerous factors that influence sexual abuse, such as inappropriate and stressful relationships and behaviors of parents at home, economic and cultural problems, child personality traits, and lack of parenting skills by parents, the most important was lack of proper sex education in children. Hence, Lily's chapter could be considered a rich account for awareness of sexual violence in preventing these types of violence.

Additionally, the novel provides several sexual harassment incidents performed by Trevor and Seanie. As an illustration, examples (3) and (4) reveal Trevor and Seanie's modus operandi in their interaction with women:

(3) On a sunny day in Eyre Square you can sit and look at girls' legs all day long. Some of those girls wear skirts so short you can almost see their underwear. I bought a pair of sunglasses that block the sides of my eyes so that they can't see me looking at them. The trick is not to let your head move as you follow them with your eyes (Ryan, 2012, p. 52).

(4) I was always a pure solid madman for women. I couldn't stop thinking about them from when I was a small boy. I used to chase girls around the estate out the Ashdown Road, trying to pull up their skirts. I used to try to bribe them for a look at their knickers (Ryan, 2012, p. 75).

These instances may be read as not only illustrative of the interiorized harassing behavior of men in the rural community of *The Spinning Heart* but also as a portrayal of common patterns in general male behavior and their relationship with women. Both Trevor and Seanie give an account of their experiences as youngsters intending to be told as funny anecdotes or serve as role models. Trevor explains the "trick" that allowed him to watch women unbeknownst to them as an attempt to flaunt his abilities in harassing. Additionally, Seanie describes his actions with pride, as being a portrayal of his masculinity. In this sense, both aim at constructing their identity as heterosexual men that fit under the sphere of the ideal hegemonic masculinity and its normativity. However, as can be gathered from the precious examples, their assertion of masculinity implies a subordinate place for women and their subsequent subjection to violence. This type of

violence has frequently been subject to a process of invisibility and confused with behaviors related to sexual attraction. Nevertheless, as Wilson and Thompson (2001, pp. 61-62) express, sexual harassment is the:

inappropriate use of power that undermines, isolates, and degrades women. As the perpetrator is normally a man, it can be seen as a product of and reflecting men's attitudes towards women in society. Harassment is inextricably linked with women's disadvantaged status at work and subordinate position in society.

Thus, Seanie's and Trevor's behavior could be considered another manifestation of violence perpetration in the novel and a form of assertion of their masculinity through the subordination and intimidation of women.

In sum, the expression of voiced violence in the novel is exerted through different methods depending on gender. Whereas for women the expression of violence is normally projected through physical and psychological abuse; for men, the methods imply emotional abuse. Because of the toughness associated with the expression of male identity, these events are normally understood as the convention in the socialization processes. Because of this, they are bound to be imperceptible in society. The next section will deal with this invisible voiceless violence as expressed by the male characters in the novel.

4.1.2. Voiceless violence

Voiceless violence is defined as a range of attitudes that fall under the categorization of abuse or violence not because they are uttered or portrayed in the behaviors of the characters of the novel but reflected in their thoughts. In the novel, the majority of cases in which voiceless violence can be identified, are included within criminal contemplation or emotional downgrading (Eibach, 2016). Furthermore, voiceless physical violence comprises murder thoughts, physical violence, and emotional and psychological abuse as has been established in the previous section of this analysis.

As to murdering contemplation and physical violence, in the novel Bobby, Brian, Trevor, and Denis display different approaches to violence that may be reflective of different factors in the Irish rural context. As an illustration, from the beginning of the story, Bobby confesses to the readers his wish for his father to be dead every day he comes to Frank's home (Ryan, 2012, p. 6). There are several instances in his chapter when he is

in a stream of consciousness describing the explicit violence he would inflict upon his father. Example (5) may be illustrative of this:

- (5) I thought about killing my father all day yesterday. There are ways, you know, to kill a man, especially an old, frail man, which wouldn't look like murder. It wouldn't be murder anyway, just putting the skids under nature. It's only badness that sustains him. I could hold a cushion or a pillow over his mouth and nose. He'd flail about, but I'd bat his hands softly back down. I wouldn't mark him. [...] He'd still be telling me I'm only a useless prick, a streak of piss, a shame to him, even and he dying. He wouldn't plead, only laugh at me with his yellow eyes (Ryan, 2012, p. 22).

Bobby's thoughts about murdering his father are influenced by his troublesome relationship with him and by the tensions that the system of land inheritance puts on him and his father, as explained in section 3.2, and further explored in section 4.2. However, the most violent and explicit thoughts about murdering can be found in Trevor's chapter as he imagines himself "plunging the screwdriver into one of her milky eyes" (Ryan, 2012, p. 53). Another instance can be found on page 54 when Trevor fantasizes about killing both Dorothy and his mother. However, Trevor's criminal thoughts are different from Bobby's because of his fantastical description of the assassination. He believes that Dorothy and his mother are real witches and when he kills them and exposes them, he will be regarded as a hero, as can be seen in example (6) below. Indeed, from this illustrative example and Trevor's narration in his chapter, one may assume that the numerous times he evades reality and imagines violence may be due to a mental health issue, as will be analyzed in the following sections.

- (6) Dorothy is one as well. I could easily just kill them both, but I need a way of making sure everyone knows what they are before I move against them. If I just kill them, I'll be sent away to prison, or to the Central Mental Hospital in Dundrum if I plead insanity. If I kill them and expose them for what they are, I'll be a hero [...] I'm going to have to take that child from the girl who lives near Dorothy [...] Then I'll kill Mother and Dorothy and tell everyone that I apprehended them just as they were about to sacrifice the child. They're witches, I'll say (Ryan, 2012, p. 54).

Finally, with regard to emotional and psychological violence, Denis and Frank may be considered the best exponents of these types of abuse. Numerous times, Frank undermines his son by implicating that Bobby is not good enough for his wife (Ryan, 2012, p. 12); by insulting him calling him a “stupid prick” (Ryan, 2012, p. 115); or by disregarding his intelligence comparing him to his mother: “That boy got his mother’s brains. He hasn’t a dust of sense” (Ryan, 2012, p. 115). This last statement may further reflect the stereotypical division between female and male brains and the imposition of gender roles. Since Bobby is ridden with emotion like his mother, Frank believes that he does not prototypically adjust to the canonic identity portrayal of men. Furthermore, the fact that Frank says that Bobby “hasn’t a dust of sense” (Ryan, 2012, p. 115) may imply that Bobby does not think the way he should, and this, in a way, is connected to mental health.³ As a matter of fact, the figure of the gendered brain is relevant in the construction of the identity of the male characters in this novel because there seems to be a pattern in their acquisition of traits and a clear-cut division between rationality and emotionality. Moreover, it is through the voice of Bobby and the women of the community, such as Bridie and Lily, who give their accounts of the times they had to shelter Bobby and his mother because of Frank’s attacks of wrath, from whom readers can also acknowledge the psychological type of abuse he inflicted in his domestic sphere, as can be seen in example (7) through Bobby’s confession:

- (7) I’ll never forgive him for the sulking, though, and the killing sting of his tongue. He ruined every day of our lives with it. Drunk, he was leering and silent and mostly asleep. Sober, he was a watcher, a horror of a man who missed nothing and commented on everything. Nothing was ever done right or cooked right or said right or bought right or handed to him properly or ironed straight or finished off fully with him. We couldn’t breathe right in a room with him. We couldn’t talk freely or easily (Ryan, 2012, p. 16).

As expressed in this example, the emotional strain, suspense, and uncertainty in which Bobby and his mother were immersed at home had serious consequences for their personality and interaction with the rest of the members of the community. Indeed, Bobby

³ Further explanation on this topic can be found in section 4.3 of this final-year project, as it deals with mental-health issues.

reveals how because of Frank's abusive behavior, his mother's personality is reduced to sadness, frustration, and fear, as can be seen in example (8):

- (8) I can forgive him for turning piles of money into piss and for leaving my mother to her holy hell, too mortified to sit up past the back row in Mass; walking quickly, head down through the village, sneaking about her business for fear of being forced to talk to anyone; sitting crying tears of frustration out beyond Coolcappa in a crock of a car with a burnt clutch and a steaming engine and a screaming child in the back of it while he sat silently swallowing her claim to a life (Ryan, 2012, p.16).

On top of that, even Frank acknowledges his actions when he says: "Then I'd go pure solid mad and wreck all before me: chairs, tables, doors, windows. I'd leave holes in plaster running with my own blood. Imagine the waste of it, thinking about killing a dead man" (Ryan, 2012, p. 118). The exertion of violence as an intermittent explosive disorder against the material of the house is a practice that falls in the category of physiological violence in the domestic sphere and that has serious consequences for the members of the family. Nevertheless, Frank does not recognize these acts as abusive, as can be seen from example (9) when he claims that:

- (9) They say violence begets violence, but that's not always true. I had no stomach for violence my whole life (Ryan, 2012, p. 118).

In fact, violent acts against the objects of a house are considered a type of psychological abuse in the domestic sphere, as mentioned above, as it is perceived as a threat to the members of the home. These acts are considered threatening because of their escalating nature. The exertion of violence does not begin with the most perceivable type of abuse, that is, (1) physical violence, but with more unperceivable abusive acts such as emotional downgrading or the use of insults which is considered (2) emotional and (3) verbal violence. In this way, the exercise of violence against objects pertaining to the house is the previous step that leads to (1) physical violence.

In sum, in this section, the expressions of voiced and voiceless violence have been explored and divided according to the distinction of the types of violence proposed in section 2.3 and analyzed from a gender perspective, as portrayed by the male characters of the novel.

4.2. FATHER-SON RELATIONSHIPS

Despite the fact that Ireland has been historically and mythologically regarded as a feminine figure in literature and that the image of “Mother Ireland” has had a pervasive presence in the Irish literary imagination of Modern times (Valente, 2011), the figure of the father arises during the 20th century in Ireland as the means that enables the son to strive for independence and identity construction.

Father-son relationship in Ireland has been an explored topic within Irish twentieth-century literature through the works of authors such as J. M. Synge in *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), James Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), and *Ulysses* (1922), or Neil Jordan in *The Dream of a Beast* (1983). In this sense, Donal Ryan’s *The Spinning Heart* (2012) draws a parallel with Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) since both develop the trope of patricide and because the protagonists, Christy Mahon, and Bobby Mahon, have the same surnames. Accordingly, this could serve as evidence for the analogy between the two literary works. Additionally, as Donal Ryan, Synge in *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) and Joyce in *Ulysses* (1920), use the topic of “motherless sons in their masterpieces, the better to dramatize the real roots of the problem of the Irish male as inadequate father” (Kiberd, 1995, p. 448). In this sense, in the novel, the relationship between father and sons is portrayed through the characters of, on the one hand, Bobby, Frank, and Francis as a son, father, and grandad, but also through Pokey and Josie, Denis and his father, and Brian and his father. In this section, the relationships between Bobby, Frank, and Francis (Franks’ father) will be analyzed.

Kiberd (1995) claimed that neither Joyce, Synge, nor O’Casey offered a convincing analysis of the causes of parental failure. Nevertheless, through the confessional narratives of the characters of *The Spinning Heart*, it could be said that Ryan provides a basis that could serve as the grounds for the distressed relationship between Bobby and Frank. From the beginning of the story, Bobby introduces his relationship with his father as a competition, a challenge to see how much time Frank remains alive. As can be gathered from example (10) below, there is a reciprocal acknowledgment of their intentions, and this creates a sense of impending tension from the beginning of the story.

(10) I go there every day to see is he dead and every day he lets me down. He hasn't yet missed a day of letting me down. He smiles at me; that terrible smile. He knows I'm coming to check is he dead. He knows I know he knows. He laughs his crooked laugh. I ask is he okay for everything and he only laughs. We look at each other for a while and when I can no longer stand the stench off of him, I go away (Ryan, 2012, p. 9).

These tensions are also reflected in Bobby's intentions with regard to the care and maintenance of the land, something which, as Ní Laoire (2005) suggests, is considered a tradition in rural Ireland. Nevertheless, in the novel, Bobby expresses his wish to get rid of the land once his father is dead, as can be seen in example (11) when he says:

(11) After I have him buried, I'll burn the cottage down and piss on the embers and I'll sell the two acres for as much as I can get. Every day he lives lowers the price I'll get. He knows that too; he stays alive to spite me (Ryan, 2012, p. 9).

This example could be reflective of the conflict between fathers and sons and the redefinition of male rural identities. As Ní Laoire expresses "[i]n Ireland, traditional farming masculinities have been rooted in idealised notions of family life, morality, landownership and farm work" (2005, p. 335). This is what Freud and Nietzsche referred to as the figurative "killing of the father," that is, in order for the son to evolve and be detached from the father and his influence, he needs to murder the father (Abraham, 1948; Perelberg, 2009). Hence, this disruptive statement could be suggestive of Bobby's wish to challenge the traditional system of land inheritance because of the socioeconomic situation of Ireland but also it may be considered a form to be finally freed from his father's influence and connection with him. Additionally, Bobby's words could be considered a reflection of the overall Irish rural crisis that is transmitted through the rejection of rural work by looking for other forms of socialization and making a living (Ní Laoire, 2005). The fact that Bobby chooses to work in the housing sector is not only a decision based on the current economic trends, but it could be argued that it is also evidence of his wish to depart from what is identified with his father. Interestingly, this behavior can also be identified in Frank when Bobby admits that:

(12) My father never drank a drop until the day the probate was finished on Granddad's farm. Paulie Jackman sent off a cheque that same day to the Revenue for the inheritance tax" (Ryan, 2012, p. 15). And this is confirmed by Frank when he wonders if his father, Francis, would know that "already there's only two acres left of his stinking, precious land, wild with briars and brambles, or will I have the pleasure of telling him how a share of the worth of his life's labour was gave in over the counter to every fat publican in five parishes (Ryan, 2012, p. 118).

It seems, then, that father and son enter a vicious generational circle of vengeance against the father which is eventually inflicted on the land. The fact that they both decide to avenge themselves by doing harm to the land may be an inclination to demolish the dedication and years of work and thus the identity and respect of their fathers. As Ní Laoire (2005, p. 341) expresses, in the historical and social situation of Ireland "the loss of a farm is more than the loss of a business enterprise, but instead, can represent the loss of a way of life and of a family inheritance, and thus can be represented as a failure in upholding one's responsibilities". Through Frank's chapter, readers may also catch a glimpse of this generational conflict that is expressed in a downward and upward direction, both against fathers and sons.

Additionally, the relationship between father and son is aggravated due to Bobby's sense of abandonment. Bobby does not only lack a parental figure, but he is forced to stop talking with his mother because of the torment the figure of his father produces, as can be seen in example (13) below. Hence, without a father and mother, Bobby feels "like an orphaned child, bereft, filling up with fear like a boat filling with water" (Ryan, 2012, p.17).

(13) We couldn't talk freely or easily. We were mad about each other, my mother and me, but he made us afraid to look at each other for fear he'd want to know were we conspiring against him again. We stopped looking at each other for good for a finish and stopped talking to each other a few years later and the day we buried her I wanted to jump into the ground and drag her back out and scream at her to come back (Ryan, 2012, p. 16).

In sum, the relationship between father and son in *The Spinning Heart* has been explored in this section by analyzing the dynamics in the relationship between Frank and

Bobby, and Francis and Frank. Despite the fact that in the novel more problematic relationships between father and son are represented, they also portray aspects of mental health issues valid for its analysis in the next section of this final-year project.

4.3. MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

According to the *Health at a Glance Report of 2016*, Ireland has one of the highest rates of mental health illness in Europe. The results of the research concluded that 18.5% of the Irish population had a mental health illness such as anxiety, bipolar disorder, depression, or alcohol addiction. In this sense, *The Spinning Heart* could be considered a particularly interesting novel that reflects the mental health disorders that affect rural Irish men. In the novel, most characters present negative thoughts that exert their minds. Incidentally, this is connected with voiceless violence, as will be analyzed in this section.

One of the factors that influence the processing of emotions is the possibility of expressing your thoughts. In this context, men have always been at a disadvantage because of the cultural and social associations of men and rationality, and women and emotionality. Research carried out by Curtin and Linehan (2002, p. 70) concluded that “[t]here was a consensus that men should not display feelings. Somewhat typically in terms of modes of masculinity that were being constructed here - self-revelation, softness or sensitivity - were regarded as “gay”. This is reflected through Bobby’s words in example (14) and further heightened and repressed by women of the novel such as Lorna in example (15):

(14) We went to a play inside in town one time; I can’t remember the name of it. You couldn’t do that without a wife. Imagine it being found out, that you went to see a play, on your own! With a woman, you have an excuse for every kind of soft thing (Ryan, 2012, p. 17).

(15) [t]hen she started looking at me really closely, and sort of laughing nervously, and asking was I crying. Are you crying? Jesus Bri, are you actually crying? (Ryan, 2012, p. 49).

These examples are illustrative of the fact that women are also participants of voiceless violence by repressing male emotions and are crucial in the maintenance of

heteronormativity conventions. When talking about Denis, for instance, Kate complains: “God, like, I have to pick my steps around him these days. Why has he to be so sensitive?” (Ryan, 2012, p. 83). As can be seen in these examples, sense and sensibility are not compatible in rural Ireland for men. From these examples one may conclude that an Irish masculine portrayal of identity is not allowed to show any kind of sorrow or other types of emotions except for anger, because of the historical association of sensitivity with females or with the stereotypical representation of gay men, that is, effeminate men. Thus, in accordance with the relationships established both in the private contexts such as at home, and in the public sphere such as at schools, children are raised to be detached from any portrayal of emotionality. Then, teenage boys construct an identity that creates tensions because of the repression of their emotions. Eventually, this would have consequences for their mental health in their adult stage of life. In this sense, Ryan depicts a male society that is heavily affected by the economic recession and the destruction caused by unemployment. Thus, the characters of *The Spinning Heart* display several types of mental health issues such as alcohol use in the case of Frank; bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia in the case of Trevor; and post-traumatic stress disorder in the case of Jason due to the sexual abuse he experimented in his childhood. As a matter of fact, the overall sense of sadness, tension, and disgrace is noticed by some feminine characters in the novel such as Hillary who gives a description of the generalized masculine behaviors of the male characters. In *The Spinning Heart*, all men suffer from mental issues that, eventually, arise as either homicide or suicide, as can be seen in example (16).

- (16) They all spend their whole lives going to Mass and playing GAA and eating farm animals and cabbage and not saying how they’re feeling until it’s too late and then BANG! They kill someone. Or themselves. They’re just as mad as the city lunatics, except the city lunatics are honest about their scumbaggery (Ryan, 2012, p. 72).

Evidence of this statement can be found in the character of Denis. As has been explained in previous sections, Denis is the only character who, being subject to looming thoughts of violent acts, assassinates Frank. In Denis’ chapter, readers are offered an explanation of his state of mind. As he expresses, because of unemployment and ghost states, he is owed a hundred grand, and he has no opportunity of being hired and has “the taxman roaring in one ear and the lads roaring in the other ear, and plant strewn all over

the country” (Ryan, 2012, p. 100). Furthermore, in several instances, Denis reveals anger issues and unmanaged emotions such as when he admits to imagining himself punching his wife in the mouth (Ryan, 2012, p. 101). In addition, as was introduced in the previous section, Denis is another character that reveals to have had a distressing relationship with his father. Because of the suffering caused by his father’s emotional abuse, Denis’ restrained emotions emerge as violence. Denis kills Frank because his attitude reminded him of his father’s. The stress caused by the economic recession and his difficulty in coping with emotions eventually makes him confused and immersed in a state of delirium that will make him believe that Frank was indeed his father as can be seen in example (17).

(17) Did he really say it, or did I imagine it? You’re nothing but a useless cunt, he said. Or did he? I’ll never know now. He started laughing again, and my eardrums vibrated again, and my eyes went a kind of blurry. I took two or three steps forward and I saw him bracing himself and he spat sideways and looked straight into my eyes just before I lamped him as hard as I could into the fucking bald old poll. GOD HELP ME, I thought I was killing my own father, just for them two or three seconds, just for that time that’ll be the rest of time for me, I swear to almighty God (Ryan, 2012, p. 171).

Finally, as to depression, Seanie’s chapter offers a valuable account for the analysis of manhood acts and male expectations and demands, and its consequences in terms of mental health issues in the context of rural Ireland. Seanie opens up to the readers admitting that he is in a depressive state, expressing his suicidal thoughts, existential doubts, and hopeless feelings. Seanie is another member of the constructing group of Pokey Burke who was left unemployed and without hope for the promised future. In his narration, he is able to provide an account of his feelings which is read as depression by readers, using common markers which in Seanie are expressed through indicators like an existential crisis, feelings of hopelessness, emptiness, or worthlessness. Nevertheless, the expression of his emotions is only allowed in the context of intimacy between readers and Seanie. In fact, on several occasions, Seanie admits to hiding his feelings in front of people, mostly men. He expresses how he “still went around laughing and messing and joking” and “never let nobody see how I was panicking” (Ryan, 2012, p. 78). These attitudes respond to what Levant, Hirsch, Celentano, and Cozza (1992), as mentioned in

section 2.3, referred to as the consensus of the five dimensions of the male role, among which avoiding femininity, restrictive emotionality, achievement and status, self-reliance, and aggression could be highlighted. Accordingly, these scholars (ibid., 1992) theorized that a recurrent form of alexithymia⁴ affects men in the process of socialization in the context of traditional masculinity. Under this sphere of repression, men identify these feelings as alien to them. In fact, this is what Seanie utters as “I have no right to feel like this” (Ryan, 2012, p. 79). This statement may be not only indicative of a depressive mind that undermines their feelings, but of the gender impositions that rural men in Ireland are subject to, since, as has been explained in this section, the expression of any other emotions than anger is only allowed for women, both in private and public contexts. Furthermore, an added factor to the emotional repression that affects rural Irish men is the common association of mental health issues and insanity. This is reflected by Seanie, as can be seen in example (18).

(18) Everyone thinks I’m gas, that I don’t give a shit about anything. I never told anyone about the blackness I feel sometimes, weighing me down and making me think things I don’t want to think. It was always there, but I never knew what it was until every prick started talking about depression and mental health and all that shite. I’m not a mentaller, like. I’m not. I just can’t see for the blackness sometimes (Ryan, 2012, p. 121).

From his words, it can be concluded that Seanie is aware of the connotations that are attached to depression illness in the community. Therefore, he feels compelled to provide a justification for his emotions due to the stigma that is still attached to mental health problems. In Ireland, approximately forty-two percent of adults suffer from a mental health disorder (Maynooth University et al., 2022), and it is estimated that one person in fifty has schizophrenia (Trinity College Dublin, 2014). As has been explored in this section through the character of Trevor, schizophrenia is a genetic disorder that because of its complexity, it is easily misrepresented and demonized. Additionally, Seanie’s chapter may be read as a call of attention from the author, Donal Ryan, who, in

⁴ Alexithymia is defined as the “inability to identify and express or describe one's feelings”. This definition has been retrieved from Merriam Webster’s Online Dictionary <https://www.merriam-webster.com/medical/alexithymia#:~:text=noun&text=Note%3A%20People%20with%20alexithymia%20typically,in%20logical%20externally%20oriented%20thought>

an attempt to normalize, and, at the same time, emphasize the importance of depression and mental health issues in rural Ireland, presents a character that reveals some of the silenced inner emotions that men have to cope with without having the necessary tools available.

All in all, this section has centered on the exploration of mental health issues in *The Spinning Heart* through the words of its male characters. Accordingly, the diversity of the mental problems reflected in the novel constitutes a valuable example for the exploration of the difficulties that men face when managing emotions, and for the prevalent prejudices attached to psychology in rural Ireland. Fortunately, thanks to recent investigations on the field of mental health problems in Ireland, action has been taken in order to acquire detailed and direct knowledge of the influential factors attached to them, and to provide tools and assistance action programs in Ireland.

5. CONCLUSION

To conclude, this study has examined the models of masculinity portrayed in Donal Ryan's *The Spinning Heart* and contributed to research on masculinities in rural Ireland. Due to the socioeconomic and cultural conditions that surrounded Irish rural men during the economic recession of the 2000s, evidence from this study suggests that the models of masculinity portrayed in the novel are constricted by a desire to fit in the standards of hegemonic masculinity, which gives way to frustrated masculinities that normally end in neglect and from which mental health issues derive.

Furthermore, in order to carry the study of this final-year project a varied and complete theoretical framework, and the research and literature of scholars such as Kibberd (1995), Clare (2001), Ní Laoire (2001; 2005) Connell (2002), Kahn (2009), Kimmel (2013), Tannen (2013), or Eibach (2016) has been used for the study of gender, masculinity and its different models, violence, and the historical context of Ireland and its rural areas (see section 2). Moreover, the methodology of this study is a qualitative analysis centered on the close reading and interpretation of the male characters in the novel. Additionally, section 3 offers a brief description of Donal Ryan's career, and of the novel and its characters. Accordingly, the strengths of this project include the adoption of new perspectives of analysis such as the exploration of voiced and voiceless violence, the consideration and examination of father and son relationships in the novel, and the inclusion of a wider spectrum of analysis on mental-health issues (see section 4). Furthermore, however relevant all the dynamics between fathers and sons portrayed in the novel are, it is beyond the scope of this final-year project due to page limitation. Consequently, future research could use this project to further examine the relationship between Denis and his father, use a corpus of novels to identify other expressions of masculinity, and study a wider variety of male identities such as homosexual, transsexual men, or non-binary people, in order to gain a better insight of male identities in Ireland.

Finally, since this novel offers a realistic outlook of Irish rural society in which mental health is disregarded and which promotes the stratification of attitudes based on gender roles, Donal Ryan's collaboration on the subject of masculinities in Ireland should also be acknowledged. Ryan manages to create a piece of fiction that serves as a subject for thought for its readers, who are mostly Irish. In this sense, it is because of the vindicative nature of Irish literature that novels such as *The Spinning Heart* are decisive for the increase of awareness and progress in society.

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