"And the Transformation Begins": Present-Tense Narration in Claire Keegan's Daughter Stories

ELKE D'HOKER

Abstract

Because of their evocations of a seemingly timeless rural Ireland with all its familiar clichés, Claire Keegan's stories have often been compared to those of John McGahern. Through an analysis of a number of Keegan's stories, all offering a daughter's perspective on this rural Ireland, this essay shows that, unlike John McGahern, Keegan is actually interested in recording and staging change. This essay first considers these stories in the context of earlier dramatizations of the mother-daughter plot in fiction by Irish women writers such as Edna O'Brien, Mary Lavin and Mary Beckett, arguing that the development of Keegan's daughters follows a far more positive trajectory and that their relationship with the mother is typically characterized in terms of "similarity with a difference". Second, this essay analyses Keegan's use of the first-person present tense in most of these daughter stories to show that this peculiar narrative mode further underscores the dimension of change. Finally, the essay offers a reading of Foster, which brings all of these strands together in a powerful "long short story".

The author of two collections of short stories, *Antarctica* (1999) and *Walk the Blue Fields* (2007), and one long short story published separately, *Foster* (2010), Claire Keegan is considered one of Ireland's most promising new writers. A measure of the critical acclaim she has received is the almost routine comparison that is made between her short fiction and that of John McGahern,¹ the undisputed master of the modern Irish short story. The comparison concerns both the topic matter of most of Keegan's stories – a seemingly timeless rural Ireland – and the symbolic realism she

1 See reviews by Kiberd, Enright, Harte, and Battersby.

- 2 Keegan spoke about this in an interview with Sean O'Hagan: "I knew there were comparisons, made, I suspect, because we both write about rural Ireland rather than because of any similarities in style . . . But I also know what I was doing and that I had to do it. The fact that it was a McGahern image made me feel that I shouldn't not do it for that reason."
- 3 The one story from that collection that is not set in Ireland is in fact a story that was previously published, in a slightly different form, in *Antarctica*.

typically applies in her Irish stories. Keegan herself seemed to confirm the influence of McGahern with her second collection, which contained one story, "Surrender," based on an anecdote from McGahern's *Memoir*.² Rural Ireland, with its familiar clichés, is indeed the preferred terrain of Keegan's short fiction. Although *Antarctica* also contains stories set in Britain and the USA, the most intensely felt stories of this collection are set in rural Ireland, and the same holds true for *Foster* and all but one of the stories in *Walk the Blue Fields*.³ These Irish stories feature outlying family farms, village priests, hard-working mothers, and feckless fathers. Only small, sly details reveal that this is not mid-twentieth-century Ireland but the Ireland of the 1990s, in which people have avocado starters at a wedding, airports smell "of perfume and roasted coffee beans, expensive things," and a Chinaman in a caravan rivals the local priest (Keegan, *Walk* 24, 13, 34).

The perspective in most of these Irish stories is that of the girl or young woman who is trying to negotiate her identity within the confines of family and local community in this seemingly unchanging rural environment. In *Antarctica*, in fact, the Irish stories stand out not only by virtue of their setting, but also because they are all narrated in the first person by a young girl, thus offering a daughter's perspective on farms and families in Ireland. The same theme is explored, albeit in different narrative modes, in "A Parting Gift" and "The Forrester's Daughter" from *Walk the Blue Fields*. And Keegan returns to the first-person present tense in *Foster*, in which a young girl describes a summer she spent on the farm of her mother's relatives. Because of this emphasis on the situation of women in a rural environment, with a specific focus on the perspective of the daughter, Keegan's stories invite comparison with those of other Irish women writers who have insistently explored the realities of women's lives in a patriarchal, rural society. Edna O'Brien's obsessive return to a suffocating mother-daughter relationship; Mary Lavin's exploration of the gaps and misunderstandings between generations; Molly Keane's grotesque avenging daughters; or Mary Beckett's depiction of female submission in the face of male violence: all of these provide as useful an intertext to Keegan's stories as the perhaps more easy or flattering parallel with John McGahern.

In this essay, therefore, I propose to consider Keegan's "daughter stories" in the context of the mother-daughter plot as it is dramatized in the novels and particularly the short stories of other Irish women writers. The stories I will analyze are "Men and Women," "Storms," "Quare Name for a Boy," and "The Ginger Rogers Sermon" from *Antarctica*; "A Parting Gift" and "The Forrester's Daughter" from *Walk the Blue Fields*; and *Foster*. These stories stand out from the rest of Keegan's work not only in terms of setting and plot but also because of their peculiar narrative situation. Because the meaning of these stories is, to an important extent, created by their narrative set-up, I will investigate the narrative characteristics of these stories against the background of recent narrative theories. In so doing, I hope to show that Keegan moves beyond the short story of her predecessors in both formal and thematic terms.

The Mother-Daughter Plot in Irish Fiction

The often fraught relations between mothers and daughters have received much attention in second-wave feminism, both in psychoanalytic theory and literary studies. In her classic study, *The Mother-Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (1988), Marianne Hirsch analyzes the relations between mothers and daughters as represented in novels by women writers. She traces a development from the absent mother in Victorian novels, through the highly ambivalent mother-bond of the artist-daughter in the modernist novel, to the rejection of the mother (and heterosexual romance) in favor of sisterhood in postmodern novels. Only in recent novels by African-American writers does Hirsch find an attempt to recover the mother's story as a necessary ingredient of the daughter's development. Far more common elements in the novels she analyzes are the daughter's ambivalent feelings of fear and anger: "fears of maternal power and . . . anger at maternal powerlessness" (167), inspired by the paradoxical combination of the myth of the omnipotent mother and the reality of the mother's submissiveness in patriarchal society. Hence, the plot of the feminine family romance, she argues, is primarily dependent on:

the heroine's refusal of conventional heterosexual and marriage plots and, furthermore, on their disidentification from conventional constructions of femininity. Mothers – the ones who are not singular, who did succumb to convention inasmuch as they are mothers – thereby become the targets of this process of disidentification and the primary negative models for the daughter. (11)

Hirsch also sees strong parallels between the mother-daughter plot as represented in fiction and the psychoanalytic account of female development. In the classic Freudian version, the individuation of the daughter is only achieved by virtue of a separation from the mother, with the help of the father. While later feminist psychoanalysts have demonstrated the importance of the preoedipal relation with the mother – against Freud's privileging of the oedipal relation with the father – they have not fundamentally challenged the idea that this close bond with the mother hampers the formation of an individual identity. It is only recently that psychologists like Jessica Benjamin and Daniel Stern have challenged the myth of this preoedipal symbiotic unity and have argued that the early mother-child relation is an intersubjective relationship in which identity depends on the recognition of the other, who in turn has to be recognized and respected as a subject in his or her own right. The recognition of the mother as a subject and the recovery of her story thus constitute, Hirsch argues, the major challenge for contemporary writers of the mother-daughter plot.

With regard to the situation in Ireland, literary critics such as Anne Fogarty, Ann Owens Weeks, Jeanette Shumaker, and Heather Ingman have remarked upon the particularly lengthy silence on the topic of the mother and the mother-daughter relation in Irish fiction. On top of the familiar problems of women writers caught in a male tradition and the equally familiar difficulties of female development in

a patriarchal culture as described by Hirsch, these critics point to the exacerbating influence of idealized images of the mother in the discourses of nationalism and Catholicism that have strongly shaped Irish culture. The mythic images of a suffering Mother Ireland and of the Virgin Mary as *Stabat Mater* have clearly hampered realistic portrayals of the joys and sorrows of motherhood. Moreover, these maternal icons typically depict an idealized mother-son relationship, which reinforced the marginalization and silencing of the mother-daughter relation in Irish literature (Ingman, *Twentieth-Century Fiction* 75). When mother-daughter stories did emerge in the second half of the twentieth century, the picture they painted was mostly a bleak and troubled one. The four critics who have analyzed in any detail the mother-daughter relations in twentieth-century Irish fiction are unanimous in their characterization of these relations as “difficult and acrimonious” (Weekes 120), “inveterately divided and strained” (Fogarty 88), riddled by tensions and “rivalries” (Shumaker 83), or characterized by “mutual hostility and conflict” (Ingman, *Twentieth-Century* 76). Recurrent elements are matrophobia and matricide, anger and resentment at the mother’s powerlessness, and a maternal failure to shield or empower the daughter. As Fogarty points out, many stories and novels “depict the desperate struggle of the daughter to avoid the trap of female subjugation and the calamity of duplicating the mother’s experience” (113). By way of example, I will characterize in more detail the mother-daughter plot as it is realized in the stories of Mary Lavin and Edna O’Brien since their focus on the short story in rural or small-town Ireland provides the most useful intertext for Keegan’s work.

If Ireland is “a land of strange, throttled, sacrificial women” for the narrator of O’Brien’s “A Scandalous Woman” (265), the sacrificial women depicted by O’Brien are typically mothers: usually married to lazy, alcoholic, and abusive husbands; these mothers struggle to maintain the family farm and its social status (cf. Shumaker 74–75; Weekes 108–09). Unable to find emotional fulfilment in their marriage, they typically turn to their daughters for closeness and consolation. Yet the daughter’s symbiotic relation with the mother is ruptured when she is sent to school, and the early identificatory love for the omnipotent mother turns to hatred when the daughter realizes the extent of her mother’s powerlessness both in her marriage and in society at large. As in many other Irish novels, Edna O’Brien’s heroines thus “flee their mothers and often their mother country in order to escape repeating their mothers’ thwarted lives” (Ingman, *Twentieth-Century* 79). Yet, this escape cannot prevent the daughters from revisiting the mothers’ fate in self-destructive relationships with dominant men and in their own attempts at mothering. As “joyless, self-denying victims of male violence,” Ingman concludes, O’Brien’s mothers “fail to empower their daughters with a sense of confidence and this has a catastrophic impact on the daughters’ ability to mother” (78). And even apart from their mothering abilities, the daughters’ failure to find lasting happiness or fulfilment in heterosexual relationships is, in stories such as “Cords,” “A Rose in the Heart of New York,” or “The Love Object,” traced back to the suffocating mother-daughter bond (Fogarty 104–05).

Although emotions tend to be far less extreme in Mary Lavin's stories, the mother-daughter relations she depicts are equally fraught with tension. As Ingman shows, Lavin's mothers are often shown to be "hampered in [their] mothering by the social constraints of the environment" (*Twentieth-Century* 79). In "The Nun's Mother" and "Sunday Brings Sunday" for instance, the prevailing sexual prudery prevents mothers from properly instructing their daughters; whereas, in "A Cup of Tea," the mother's desire to mold her daughter according to the demands of domestic femininity keeps her from respecting her daughter's academic ambitions. In other Lavin stories too, the tensions between mothers and daughters are mostly rendered in terms of tragic misunderstandings, punctured only by brief and fleeting moments of intimacy (cf. Weekes 114, Ingman, *Twentieth-Century* 80). In spite of the greater sympathy for the position of the mother in Lavin's short fiction, her mother figures again remain too weak and too much implicated in the demands and strictures of patriarchy to empower their daughters to a sense of identity of their own.

In tracing these mother-daughter plots in twentieth-century Irish fiction, all four critics do find evidence of a movement toward a more positive realization of the mother-daughter plot in recent fiction. Shumaker discovers a more playful treatment of mother-daughter rivalries in the short fiction of Helen Lucy Burke; Weekes observes a shift in perspective from the daughter to the mother in the oeuvre of Lavin, O'Brien, and Jennifer Johnston; and Fogarty and Ingman note a movement toward a recovery of the mother's story in contemporary novels. As Fogarty puts it, "fictions highlighting the gulf between mothers and daughters give way to narratives that find equal space for stories of filial protest and escape and the otherness of maternal discourse" (89).

This shift to the mother's perspective seems to have consolidated itself in recent Irish literature. The short fiction of Anne Enright, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, and Emma Donoghue, for instance, features a considerable number of "mother stories": either stories in which the experience of motherhood is explicitly focused on, such as Enright's "Yesterday's Weather," "Caravan," and "Shaft" or Donoghue's "Expecting" and "Through the Night" or stories in which the dominant perspective is that of woman as wife, mother, and lover, as in most of Ní Dhuibhne's stories. This is not to say that the perspective of the daughter is entirely absent in the work of these writers. In Enright's "Honey" and "The Cruise," for example, the middle-aged protagonists try to come to terms with the ageing and death of their parents, and Donoghue's "Words for Things" dramatizes a girl's revolt against her mother's gender prescriptions in the late eighteenth century. On the whole, however, the maturation process of the adolescent daughter is a far less prominent topic in the work of these writers than in that of their predecessors. While this shift of focus from daughter to mother is part of an international trend, as Marianne Hirsch has pointed out, in Ireland, this has coincided with an overall movement from rural to urban realities in fiction and a gradual liberation from the nationalist and religious doctrines of twentieth-century Ireland. Within this Irish and international climate, Keegan's

return to the daughter's story in a rural setting is remarkable enough to warrant a more detailed investigation.

"I Wish I Was Big": From Childhood to Adolescence

If the thorny road of female development is Keegan's main interest, the specific form of the short story allows her to focus on one crucial stage or one pivotal moment in that development. In this way, most of Keegan's stories bear out Frank O'Connor's characterization of the short story as depicting "a moment of change": "It's a bright light falling on an action in such a way that the landscape of that person's life assumes a new shape. Something happens – the iron bar is bent – and anything that happens to that person afterwards, they never feel the same about again" (Ingman, *A History of the Irish Short Story* 147). For Keegan's daughters, this moment of change usually concerns the threshold between childhood and adolescence, between being a child and learning how to behave as a girl – "the transformation," as the narrator of "The Ginger Rogers Sermon" calls it (*Antarctica* 191). In a patriarchal society this entails learning about gender differences and about gendered norms and expectations. In Keegan's stories, the protagonists are typically eager, clever, and imaginative young girls with ambitions that initially cut across the gender divide. In "The Forrester's Daughter," the girl of the title comes home from school, telling her mother, "that she solved a word problem in mathematics, that long ago Christina Columbus discovered the earth was round. She says she'll let the Taoiseach marry her and then changes her mind. She will not marry at all but will become the captain of a ship. She sees herself standing on deck with a storm blowing the red lemonade out of her cup" (*Walk* 66). In "The Ginger Rogers Sermon," the protagonist proudly describes how she joins in the work of her father and the other lumberjacks in summer even though her mother "says it is no job for a girl" (*Antarctica* 187). And the slightly naive narrator in "Men and Women" wishes that she will become like her brother and father when she grows up, since they are being served while she and her mother do all the chores in the house: "I wish I was big. I wish I could sit beside the fire and be called up to dinner and draw triangles, lick the nibs of special pencils, sit behind the wheel of a car and have someone open gates that I could drive through" (25).

Yet the adult world of these stories is strictly divided along gender lines: women work within the house; men conduct their affairs outside; men drive cars; women don't; sons are allowed to study; girls have to help. That the division is a hierarchical and lopsided one is made particularly clear in "Men and Women," witness the following exchange between the girl and her mother: "'How come they do nothing?' I ask. . . . 'They're men,' she says, as if this explains everything. Because it is Christmas, I say nothing" (24). As the narrator of this story gradually comes to learn, the privileges of manhood do not just entail being served, but also being entitled to sleep around, to boss and belittle women – in fact treating them no better than the farm animals. When her brother and father discuss the women at the New Year's Eve

4 A similar attitude can be found in *Foster* where the girl's father says to the foster family: "She'll ate but you can work her" (12).

party, the narrator notes: "I think about the mart, all the men at the rails bidding for heifers and ewes" (33).⁴

Nevertheless, as in the Irish stories discussed before, it is primarily Keegan's mothers who act as guardians of these gender divisions: they teach the girls the chores around the house, collude in serving the men, and instruct their daughters into "proper femininity." When the narrator in "The Ginger Rogers Sermon" gets her first period, her mother warns her: "Don't let yer father see them [the towels]," and the narrator comments resentfully on "[h]er always hiding women away, like we're forbidden" (*Antarctica* 192). As we have seen, resentment against the mother is the common reaction of daughters who are confronted with the submissive position of women in a patriarchal family structure and society. And as Hirsch and other critics have noted, this is often coupled with a deliberate turning away from the mother to avoid repeating her fate. This is not, however, what happens in Keegan's daughter stories (with the exception of "The Parting Gift," which I will discuss separately, later). The young girls in these stories retain, and even strengthen, their relationship with their mother in their negotiations with a gendered universe and patriarchal society. This is mainly because small acts of resistance or rebellion on the part of the mother empower the daughter in her attempts to carve out her own role in society, a role which thus promises to be different from that of the mother.

In "The Forrester's Daughter," for instance, the mother takes revenge for her husband's betrayal of their daughter's trust by telling the "story" of her adulterous affair to the neighbors, thus upsetting both the power relations in the family and the iron Irish law of keeping everything within the family unit and not letting "the neighbours" know (*Walk* 82). In "Men and Women," the daughter is similarly empowered by her mother's rebellion after the New Year's village dance where she has been treated with even more than the usual contempt by her philandering husband. For the first time, the mother refuses to get out and open the gates for her husband as they drive up the lane to the farm and her children follow suit. When the father gets out of the car at last, the mother takes the wheel herself (only the daughter knows that she has secretly been watching driving programs on television). The closing paragraph of the story reads:

My father is getting smaller. It feels as though the trees are moving, the chestnut tree whose green hands shelter us in summer is backing away. Then I realise it's the car. It's us. We are rolling, sliding backwards without a hand brake and I am not out there putting the stone behind the wheel. And that is when Mammy takes the steering. She slides over into my father's seat and puts her foot on the brake. We stop going backwards. She revs up the engine and puts the car in gear, the gearbox grinds, she hasn't the clutch in far enough, but then there's a splutter and we're moving. Mammy is taking us forward, past the Santa sign, past my father, who has stopped singing, now through the open gates. She drives us through the fresh snow. I can smell the pines. When I look back, my

father is standing there watching our taillights. The snow is falling on him, on his bare head while he stands there, clutching his hat. (*Antarctica* 34)

Although it describes but a small act of resistance, the symbolism of this passage highlights its epiphanic potential for the daughter whose perspective on life has fundamentally changed: Santa and father being left behind, the fresh snow and open gates suggest new possibilities for the future.

In another story from *Antarctica*, “The Ginger Rogers Sermon,” the mother shifts the blame for the lumberjack’s suicide from her young daughter (who seduced him) to the man himself by pointing the finger to his lack of dancing skills. Hence, she insists on “teaching Eugene [her son] as a precaution, as if knowing these steps will carry him through, prevent him from tying a noose around his neck later on” (200). The whole family starts dancing in the sitting room, with mother and daughter moving Eugene “into the places he should go” (201). In the dancing, brother and sister parodically stage the gender roles that are expected of them: “The last picture I remember is the roll-on flying across the room with the snap of elastic and Eugene asking, ‘Can I interest you in a snog at the gale wall?’ as he swings me in a perfect twist (201). Dancing is not just a liberating performance for the mother – witness the discarded roll-on – but also an empowering one for the daughter as its parodic enactment of gender roles may enable the daughter to survive in a gendered world.

“Storms,” on the other hand, tells the story of a mother who is not herself able to survive in this world, but nevertheless ensures that her daughter will. While the extremely sensitive mother loses her bearings after her own mother’s death and succumbs to madness, she also protects her daughter by telling her stories, making her see the stars, and teaching her about difference: “She told me about my father, how he’d bruised her for fifteen years, because she was not the same as other women. She taught me the difference between loving and liking somebody. She said she didn’t like me any more than him because I had the same cruel eyes” (*Antarctica* 66). The mother shows her daughter that she is “similar but different” from her, and she also directs her to her dual inheritance: from father as well as mother. The daughter starts to explore the heritage of her “father’s people” (62) – a box with old books and papers – but also combines it with her mother’s knowledge of stars, animals, and burns. The daughter concludes her story as follows: “I run the house now. The last man who said I was old enough got scalded. My mother always said there was nothing as bad as a burn. And she was right. It’s turning out that I’m taking no nonsense from anybody.” And although she proudly claims her father’s “cruel” eyes, she visits her mother every Sunday: “Maybe I need a little of what my mother has. Just a little. I take a small share of it for my own protection . . . you have to face the worst possible case to be able for anything” (68).

This emphasis on matrilineal heritage, on being part of a line of mothers and daughters, is a central element in most of Keegan’s daughter stories. In “The Ginger Rogers Sermon” this is realized through the metaphor of the dancing, being passed on from mother to daughter. In “Men and Women” and in *Foster*, the household duties

shared by mother, or foster mother, and daughter are evoked both as rituals being passed on from generation to generation and as moments of mother-daughter bonding, as when the narrator of “Men and Women” describes their Christmas morning ritual: “Nobody’s up except Mammy and me. We are the early birds. We make tea, eat toast and chocolate fingers for breakfast, then she puts on her best apron, the one dappled with strawberries, and turns on the radio, chops onions and parsley while I grate a plain loaf into crumbs. We stuff the turkey and waltz around the kitchen” (*Antarctica* 23). In “Quare Name for a Boy,” the older – and pregnant – daughter decides to return to rural Ireland, taking over the ways and knowledge of her “female relatives” (*Antarctica* 101), but with a difference:

Green wood hisses in the grate, the resin oozing out from under the bark. Lines of connecting sparks, what my grandmother called soldiers, march across the soot. She said that was a sign of bad weather. . . . I will live out of a water barrel and check the skies. I will learn fifteen types of wind and know the weight of tomorrow’s rain by the rustle of the sycamores. Make nettle soup and dandelion bread, ask for nothing. And I won’t comfort you. I will not be the woman who shelters her man same as he’s a boy. That part of my people ends with me. (107)

This idea of similarity with a difference is in fact a crucial one in all of Keegan’s daughter stories. It applies not just to the acts of rebellion that empower the daughter to do differently or to the matrilineal heritage with a twist that the daughter takes on, but it also characterizes the relationship between mother and daughter in general. For whereas the emphasis on similarity and heritage or the Christmas rituals in “Men and Women” might seem to suggest a preoedipal symbiotic mother-daughter relationship of the kind that could be found in Edna O’Brien’s stories, this is not really the case. The relationship between mother and daughter in Keegan’s stories is characterized not so much by union or identity as by mutual solidarity and respect. The daughters in these stories do not see the mothers as omnipotent objects, to be feared or loved, possessed or rejected, but rather as subjects in their own right. In “Men and Women,” for instance, the young girl – unlike her brother – comes to recognize her mother’s feelings on the New Year’s Party and tries to step in and “rescue” her (*Antarctica* 29). In “The Ginger Rogers Sermon,” daughter and mother enact another gendered ritual every Saturday when they are dressing up for an evening out:

In the kitchen, Ma sets her hair. We call it the Salon. . . . I hand her an old *Woman’s Weekly* and imagine it’s *Vogue*. The last page is ripped out so Da can’t read about women’s problems. “Do you want a coffee?” I shout above the noise. There was never any coffee in that house. She stays under there, deaf and talking out loud like an old person, and I hand her a cup of frothy Ovaltine. . . . Pot Belly, I call her. “Are ya going dancing now, Pot Belly? Where’s the beauty contest, Pot Belly?” . . . She calls me the Terror: “Shut up, ya Terror.” (*Antarctica* 185)

This clearly points to what Jessica Benjamin has called an intersubjective relation of “mutual recognition” in which the other is recognized as “a separate person who is like us yet distinct” (23).

A story in which the daughter quite explicitly struggles with “think[ing] about the mother as a subject in her own right” (23) is “A Parting Gift,” to which I will turn now. It stands out among Keegan’s daughter stories because the daughter’s development follows along the more negative lines familiar from earlier Irish stories. Yet in this very exceptionality I believe it “proves” the pattern that could be observed in the other stories. In “A Parting Gift,” the archetypal put-upon wife of a cruel, authoritarian husband and mother of too many children offers her own daughter up for some personal peace by sending her to her husband for his monthly allowance of sex. The daughter, understandably traumatized, has failed to realize the intellectual potential she, like all of Keegan’s other daughters, showed as a child and is now poised for escape, to the USA, to avoid literally taking her mother’s place. The story evokes the day of departure and the unspoken feelings and thoughts between mother and daughter: “In her bedroom your mother is moving things around, opening and closing doors. You wonder what it will be like for her when you leave. Part of you doesn’t care. She talks through the door” (*Walk* 3). Doors remain closed between them and even though the daughter shows understanding and even pity for her mother’s situation – “you wonder if she will ever forgive you for leaving her there with her husband” (10) – the ending is less than hopeful, with the daughter locking herself in a toilet cubicle at the airport. Her severely circumscribed life is duplicated in that of her elder brother who, in spite of his dreams of escape, “will never leave the fields” (12). The daughter’s failed development in this story is highlighted in narrative terms by the use of second-person narration, whereby the daughter refers to herself as “you.” The daughter’s inability to tell her own story in the first person thus enacts her failure to realize a confident sense of self.

“I Watch Him Reverse”: The Functions of Simultaneous Narration

Quite the opposite is the case in all but one of the other daughter stories, which are told by a quite confident first-person narrator. What is striking about these first-person narratives, moreover, is the frequent use of the present tense. In “The Ginger Rogers Sermon” and “Storms” this present tense can be interpreted as the fairly conventional historical present since it is embedded within past-tense narration. Such tense shifts in narratives are usually recognized as having a “highlighting impact,” in terms of an “enhanced vividness, dramatic effect, or presentification” (Cohn 99). In “The Ginger Rogers Sermon,” the retrospective perspective is established in the opening scenes – “Don’t ask me why we called him Slapper Jim. My mother stamped his image in my head, and I was at an age when pictures of a man preceded the man himself” (*Antarctica* 182). The narrator’s shift to the present tense, which is maintained to the end, thus highlights the vividness with which these life-changing events are still present in her memory. In “Storms,” too, a shift to the present tense

occurs when the narrator relates the traumatic event of her mother being forcefully taken away to the madhouse. As Dorrit Cohn points out in her discussion of present-tense narration in *The Distinction of Fiction*, the historical present is “a structurally harmless stylistic device,” which is “readily assimilated” in reading and also has its counterparts in everyday or oral narration (99).

This is not the case, however, for narratives that feature the first-person present tense throughout. This type of “simultaneous narration,” as Cohn first called it, is recognized as “an unnatural form of narration,” which “doesn’t have a clear, real-world analogue” (Delconte 429) and which seems to violate the general rule that “narrative is past, always past” (Scholes 210). Distinct from interior monologue, which directly transcribes a character’s thoughts in the first person, simultaneous narration has the first-person narrator relate the events as they happen. A few critics have described this mode as a “novelty” in contemporary fiction, with such notable practitioners as J. M. Coetzee, Margaret Atwood, and Bret Easton Ellis.⁵ Claire Keegan too uses simultaneous narration with quite striking effects in some of the daughter stories we are considering here: “Quare Name for a Boy,” “Men and Women,” and *Foster*. In all of these stories, this seemingly unnatural narrative form further underscores the idea of change that Keegan’s daughter stories thematically evoke.

Cohn has convincingly demonstrated the fluidity and flexibility of the simultaneous present tense. The present tense – that most “pluri-significant” of all tenses, as she puts it – can be used to refer not just to the present and the past but also to the future as in the case of the “irrealis present,” which represents “fantasies and imagined dream-scenarios” (107). In addition, the present tense is characterized by an aspectual fluidity, which can make it difficult to decide whether “it signif[ies] the singular moment of the speech-act or its durative-iterative context” (106). In her use of the present tense, Keegan plays especially with these hazy borders between the “now” and the “often.” On the one hand, the present tense evokes the sense of ritual, habit, and cyclical time present in the rural surroundings but also the domestic duties of the women or the recurring social events of dances and marts. Consider the opening paragraph of “Men and Women”:

My father takes me places. He has artificial hips so he needs me to open the gates. . . . I open the gates, my father freewheels the Volkswagen through, I close the gates behind him and hop back into the passenger seat. To save petrol, he starts the car on the run, gathering speed on the slope before the road, and then we’re off to wherever my father is going on that particular day. (*Antarctica* 19)

Almost imperceptibly, however, the iterative present changes into the singular present to describe the quite life-changing experiences on New Year’s Eve: “For the first time in my life, I have some power. I can butt in and take over, rescue and be rescued” (29). The multiple semantic possibilities of the present tense allow not just for an easy slide from the now into the often, but also for a surprisingly fluid transition

5 For an analysis of the effects of the first-person present tense in the work of these and other writers, see Cohn, Delconte, Hansen, and Miyahara.

between the often and the now, between fixed habits and the changes that are made. In this way, Keegan's use of simultaneous narration supports the hopeful dimension of the daughter stories, which open up the possibility that action and change, however small, are possible, even within conservative rural communities, seemingly fixed in timeless rituals and rigid habits.

A second important aspect of simultaneous narration is the radical absence of retrospection. The temporal distance between experiencing and narrating, the hallmark of traditional past-tense fictional autobiography is "literally reduced to zero: the moment of narration is the moment of experience, the narrating self is the experiencing self" (Cohn 107). As a result, the possibility of a backward glance is cancelled out. The effect in Keegan's stories, I would argue, is again one of underscoring hope and the possibility of change. In the more traditional, retrospective first-person narration used by McGahern, for instance, the dominant mood is one of disillusionment and inertia (Ingman, *A History* 197–98) as the narrator looks back from his present situation trying to locate the moment where opportunities were missed or wrong choices were made. In Keegan's stories, to the contrary, the future is left open as a realm where dreams, hopes, and resolutions may be realized, as is further indicated by the shift to the future tense – "I will" – at the end of *Foster* and "Quare Name for a Boy."

In its fusion of experience and narration, Cohn argues, simultaneous narration also achieves "a seamless continuity . . . between outer and inner reality, report and reflection" similar to figural narration in the third-person domain (107). Yet, unlike figural narration where a narrator continues to be present behind the character-focalizer, simultaneous narration radically dispenses with the narrative functions of interpretation and evaluation, instead transferring these roles to the reader (DelConte 430). Keegan again skilfully uses this aspect of simultaneous narration in order to heighten the importance of careful observation for her daughter-narrators. This is especially the case in *Foster* and "Men and Women," in which the narrators are quite young children, observing and describing a grown-up reality that they do not always fully understand. By using these "naïve narrators," Keegan effectively engages the reader's cooperation in decoding these descriptions and supplying the necessary interpretation and evaluation.

The "Perfect Opportunity to Say Nothing": *Foster*

Since *Foster* brings together many of the aspects of daughter stories that I have outlined and also uses simultaneous narration to a very powerful effect, I will turn to a more detailed consideration of this story in the final part of this article. *Foster* was first published in *The New Yorker*, and a "revised and expanded version"⁶ was subsequently brought out as a separate book publication by Faber in 2010. In an interview for *The Scotsman*, Keegan objects to the term *novella* being applied to the book. She calls it instead a "long short story," which she feels to be the right form considering the length of time – one summer – the story covers (Black). As in "Men

6 This is what the blurb of *Foster* says, but a comparison of the two stories shows that there is very little difference between the two versions.

and Women,” the present tense in *Foster* serves to underscore the importance of the narrator’s observations. Quite literally dropped by her father with relatives of her mother for the duration of the summer while her mother was having yet another child, careful observation is the narrator’s lifeline as she learns to negotiate this different life and, by extension, life in a gendered, patriarchal society in general. Thus, her first impression of her relatives’ farm suggests this might be a good place, clean, warm, and well-cared for: “Under the smell of baking there’s some disinfectant, some bleach. She lifts a rhubarb tart out of the oven and puts it on the bench to cool: syrup to the point of bubbling over, thin leaves of pastry baked into the crust” (8). She concludes, “this is a different type of house. Here there is room, and time to think. There may even be money to spare” (13). Like the naive narrator in “Men and Women” (whom she strongly resembles in age and sensibility), the girl’s observations primarily teach her about differences: differences between men and women, but also differences among families and households, among men and women. Thus, she notes that Mrs. Kinsella – mostly called “the woman” – is like her own mother but with a difference: “She is even taller than my mother with the same black hair, but hers is cut tight like a helmet” (7). The girl also notes that her hands are “softer than [her] mother’s” (7) and that Mrs. Kinsella is better able to stand up to her father: “A stalk falls to the floor and then another. He waits for her to pick it up, to hand it to him. She waits for him to do it. Neither one of them will budge. In the end, it’s Kinsella who stoops to lift it” (14). The difference between the kind and caring Kinsella and her own cold and improvident father is especially marked, as the girl turns to Kinsella for the love and recognition she does not receive from her father:

Kinsella takes my hand in his. As soon as he takes it, I realise my father has never once held my hand, and some part of me wants Kinsella to let me go so I won’t have to feel this. It’s a hard feeling but as we walk along I begin to settle and let the difference between my life at home and the one I have here be. (61)

The girl also learns to negotiate the gendered divisions which do exist on this farm, although she is more readily allowed to cross over from one realm into the other. During the first few weeks, she helps the woman around the house while wearing the clothes of the Kinsellas’ dead son. After learning of the death of the son, she starts wearing her new frocks and dresses – yet with “the boy’s jacket” (75) – but follows Kinsella around on the farm. As in “Storms,” the idea seems to be that both paternal and maternal heritages must be integrated for a successful development – if not those of your own family, then those of a foster family. What the narrator has learned at the end of her stay, she has learned from both her substitute father and her substitute mother: the twin virtues of resistance and respect. Resistance she learns from the woman’s small defiant actions and from Kinsella who tells her, “you don’t ever have to say anything . . . always remember that as a thing you need never do. Many’s the man lost much just because he missed a perfect opportunity to say nothing” (65).

Equally important is Mrs. Kinsella's reticent respect for the girl's feelings, which she demonstrates right at the outset of the stay by laughing off the girl's bedwetting as a case of an old, "weeping" mattress (28). The girl returns this respect by acknowledging the woman's very own weeping at the end, promising she "will never, ever tell" about the accident (88): "'Nothing happened.' This is my mother I am speaking to but I have learned enough, grown enough, to know that what happened is not something I need ever mention. It is my perfect opportunity to say nothing" (86). The female development sketched in *Foster* is thus again a hopeful one, as the girl's stay with her foster parents has taught her about differences and choices, about responsibility and respect. Having observed different possibilities enables her to envisage and realize a life different from that of her mother, in the same way as she is "making up something different to happen at the end" of the books that Kinsella has taught her to read (78).

In all, as the above analysis hopes to have shown, this similarity with a difference is central to Keegan's daughter stories and in particular to the mother-daughter relationship these stories focus on. In short, in spite of her apparent return to a traditional, timeless, and often clichéd rural Ireland, Keegan is actually interested in recording change. That these changes are often small and barely visible beneath the surface layer of the rural life depicted seems to fit with Keegan's valuation of ritual and tradition, of a life lived in tune with the cycle of the seasons. Nevertheless, these small changes are important for Keegan's daughters, as they enable them to move beyond their mothers without repudiating them, as was the case in earlier Irish fiction. In a similar way, one might say Keegan herself, in formal terms, moves her short stories beyond her predecessors even while learning from and paying tribute to their particular achievements.

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