Feminism and Power in the Works of Louise O'Neill

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Abstract

Within the context of Irish and international twenty-first-century young adult (YA) literature, this dissertation examines how Irish author Louise O'Neill's contemporary young adult fiction articulates and explores ideas and debates concerning power and empowerment, feminism, gender, and consent. It addresses how the concept of "rape culture" ("a complex set of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women" Buchwald et al., 1995, xi) and the intersections between feminism and power have become increasingly prominent in Irish cultural discourse in the years following the publication of O'Neill's *Only Ever Yours* and *Asking For It* – in 2014 and 2015 respectively. This dissertation asks whether texts like O'Neill's, that contain overtly feminist political ideology rethink freedom and empowerment for women and girls, really propose new ways of thinking about power and gender, or do they get lost in, or weighed down by, authorial agenda and controversy? It is argued that O'Neill's narrative approach to power results in a narrow focus on sexism, with damning limitations for male and female characterisation. This dissertation critiques the works' representation of traditional notions of masculinity and emphasises their failure to consider men's position within the gendered construct; women's role in constructing masculinities; and male oppression. Considering the socio-political context in Ireland and broader Western culture in which O'Neill's works are written, and taking into account a selection of Irish and international YA literature that addresses similar issues in different contexts, this dissertation highlights the contradictions in O'Neill's works. It illuminates the potential of O'Neill's texts to function as a form of literary/social fundamentalism, which often undermines, rather than promotes, equality. By engaging with these aspects of O'Neill's works, and, more broadly, those authored by other contemporary Irish YA writers committed to voicing a very different Ireland to that of previous generations, this dissertation offers a timely and necessary response to contemporary feminist Irish YA fiction and substantiates why such works are deserving of increased critical scrutiny.

Introduction

1. i. *Thesis*

Within the context of Irish and international twenty-first-century young adult (YA) literature, this dissertation examines how Irish author Louise O'Neill's contemporary young adult fiction articulates and explores ideas and debates concerning power and empowerment, feminism, gender, and consent. It addresses how the concept of "rape culture" ("a complex set of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women" Buchwald et al. 1995, xi) and the intersections between feminism and power have become increasingly prominent in Irish cultural discourse in the years following the publication of O'Neill's *Only Ever Yours* and *Asking For It* – in 2014 and 2015 respectively. This dissertation asks whether texts like O'Neill's, that contain overtly feminist political ideology rethink freedom and empowerment for women and girls, really propose new ways of thinking about power and gender, or do they get lost in, or weighed down by, authorial agenda and controversy?

It is argued that O'Neill's narrative approach to power results in a narrow focus on sexism, with damning limitations for male and female characterisation. This dissertation critiques the works' representation of traditional notions of masculinity and emphasises their failure to consider men's position within the gendered construct; women's role in constructing masculinities; and male oppression. Considering the socio-political context in Ireland and broader Western culture in which O'Neill's works are written, and taking into account a selection of Irish and international YA literature that addresses similar issues in different contexts, this dissertation highlights the contradictions in O'Neill's works. It illuminates the potential of O'Neill's texts to function as a form of literary/social fundamentalism, which often undermines, rather than promotes, equality. By engaging with

these aspects of O'Neill's works, and, more broadly, those authored by other contemporary Irish YA writers committed to voicing a very different Ireland to that of previous generations, this dissertationoffers a timely and necessary response to contemporary feminist Irish YA fiction and substantiates why such works are deserving of increased critical scrutiny.

This dissertation is, more broadly, also concerned with examining works by other contemporary Irish women writers, such as Deirdre Sullivan, Sarah Maria Griffin, and Moïra Fowley Doyle. Like O'Neill's, their works are characterised by a determination to confront controversial issues in Irish history and culture in a manner far removed from the "sanitised approach" previously evident in Irish writing for the young (Kennon, 2020, 135). Their novels reflect how feminist theory has moved beyond academic and activist fringes into mainstream discourse, media and literature. Furthermore, their works suggest how Irish YA literature is increasingly a "tool of cultural intervention" (Hunt, "What Shall We Tell the Grown Ups?", 2020). Their works were written, published and received at a time when YA literature embraced – in a similar way to literature, the arts and popular culture, more generally – the new wave of feminism in the "MeToo" era. Within the context of a heightened cultural moment, in Ireland and internationally, in which fresh attention was given to an interrogation of the nexus of power, gender, social class, and race as underlying aspects of desire, sex, abuse, and oppression, their works make a case for the capacity of all literature, but YA literature specifically, to challenge/address perceived social issues and effect change.

The "MeToo" movement marked a significant moment – both culturally and politically – in American, and then more global, twenty-first-century history. It brought amplified international attention to sexual assault and abuse against women, and it continues to influence contemporary debate and constitutional and civil change. Matters brought to light in this era markedly shape these Irish writers' fiction, making them exemplary of contemporary Irish literature's increasing engagement with international feminist issues.

Propelled by these authors' concerns with generating a call for action regarding women's rights and intersectional equality, the lasting effects of Irish Catholic management and supervision of women's bodies and sexualities have become a markedly dominant theme in recent Irish YA literature. Exploring feminist issues, such as the silencing of women and the female body's maltreatment, is of primary interest to these authors; their works are committed to counteracting the notable absence of representation of issues especially pertinent to women and girls in the Irish YA literary tradition. Although a commitment to interrogating traditional gender roles and presenting broadened, more inclusive, representations of adolescent identity in these works makes them radical sites for the kind of imaginative alternatives necessary for tackling a continuing fight in Ireland for women's rights and intersectional equality, aspects of the works – particularly O'Neill's – contradict their feminist aim.

While the influence and achievement of O'Neill's work in emphasising the need for social and political change in Ireland concerning rape and sexual assault is generally accepted, problematic elements of the work have been largely unexamined. *Asking For It* has been praised, largely uncritically, for drawing attention to "rape culture" as a facet of Irish youth culture. O'Neill's status as both author and cultural commentator, with a strong extra-textual presence, makes her works instrumental in shaping the values, attitudes and behaviours of the young people that they reach – adding to the pertinence of this research. The works' position as YA texts that are both representative of, and an active part of, the diffusion of radical feminist thought across popular culture means that they ought to be properly critically engaged with and not unconsciously celebrated. Despite a number of critical essays/works published on O'Neill's texts for young adults, no scholarly monographs have critically examined representations of female agency and sexuality in the works in terms of their potential to limit, rather than liberate. Nor have the dangers of presenting extremism, in terms of male sexual violence as normalcy in the texts been given critical attention.

This dissertation asks whether O'Neill engages in absolutism by universalising her own experience and her interpretation of other women's experiences, to portray falsely universal manifestations of girlhood and womanhood. It is argued that O'Neill's depiction of men as equally privileged and women as similarly subordinated, regardless of how they are socially situated, is myopic; it fails to consider the many other factors that can intersect with gender and sex to contribute to both oppression and privilege.

By insisting that "rape culture" is an absolute reality damaging to all women – and only women – O'Neill offers a limited interrogation of the status quo rather than a radical rethinking of sexuality and gender. Her account of "rape culture" as omnipresent in all women's everyday lives is a feminist distortion. Christina Hoff Sommers (2005), T.S. Petrus (2017), and others have argued that discussion about "rape culture" in much White, feminist theory offers comparable misrepresentations. Hoff Sommers argues that the findings of well-funded research on rape and domestic abuse in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the US were highly questionable but nevertheless presented as orthodoxy and widely accepted. The research in question was carried out by a group of feminists whom Hoff Sommers terms "gender feminists" and describes as at odds with "equity feminists". Hoff Sommers contends that the road to "reasonable answers" about gender violence is "often blocked by feminist dogmas" as well as by journalists and newscasters interested in "the sensational more than the accurate" (9:17:12-9:17:13). Twenty-two years later, in 2017, T.S. Petrus's critique of the existence of a "rape culture" in South Africa suggests the continued contemporary relevance of Hoff Sommer's warning. Petrus contextualises "erroneous distortions" of "rape culture" in South Africa within the "so-called gender war, a phenomenon emanating from the liberal feminist and gynocentric social movements in theWest" (80). Petrus argues that references in the news and on social media in South Africa presupposing that a culture of rape exists there, will "hamper development" not empower women (80).

Hoff Sommers's and Petrus's arguments are relevant to how "rape culture" is addressed

in this dissertation, especially with regard to the all-encompassing, indiscriminate nature of the term and its uncritical, wide-spread use. O'Neill adopts the same kind of radical ideology as the "gender feminists" Hoff Sommers questioned in 1990s America, whom she described as being "committed to the doctrine that the "vast majority" of men who violently or sexually assault women are not "fringe characters but men whom society regards as normal" (9:17:20-25). Views like O'Neill's are increasingly prevalent in popular media and literature, leading to the term "rape culture" becoming mainstream in Irish society. This dissertation draws attention to how accounts of the prevalence of sexual violence in popular discourse can be indiscriminate and inflammatory and often fail to consider the particular socio-cultural context and other relevant forces at work concerning power dynamics. By failing to attend to intersectional relationships between gender, sex, Whiteness, and class privilege, I contend that O'Neill's interpretation of Ireland as a "rape culture" is in danger of entrenching traditional conceptions of male and female genders and adding to White feminism's ideological grounding in "gendered victimology" (Moon and Holling 2020, 253).

The past decade has seen a momentous cultural change in Ireland, which is evident in its children's and young adult literature. Irish YA literature is now addressing issues that the tradition of publishing for young people in Ireland has hitherto occluded. A driving force in the development of Irish YA literature has been its feminist fiction. Louise O'Neill is an important figure in this development. Her work has played a significant role in developing Irish literature for young people that increasingly reflects and empowers young women. My analysis of the work's limitations does not diminish this success. Instead, it attends to the necessity for YA literature labelled feminist to be categorised more specifically into a broaderfield of variability; that is, by attending to the variety of representations undertaken to destabilise sexism with the allowance that it can, at times, perpetuate it.

As "needs change, powers alter, canons crack" and "we declare cultural wars", it is all the more important that we study writing for the young, while remembering that "though

literature may challenge dogmas, it is also quickened by commitments at the deepest level – commitments, and yes, obsessions: literature has its own absolutism, just as fundamentalism has its own poetry of beliefs. In nuances begin our responsibilities" (Hassan 2008, 17). This dissertation argues that Irish YA literature's relatively young status, combined with the accelerated rate of cultural change that Ireland has recently experienced, make it imperative that Irish literature for children and young adults is examined with an acknowledgement and awareness that no literature is innocent of absolutism.

1. ii. *The Primary Texts*

Louise O'Neill is the author of *Only Ever Yours* (2014) and *Asking For It* (2015) – the novel and the play adaptation (2018) – and *The Surface Breaks* (2018), a feminist reimagining of "The Little Mermaid". These were published for young adults as well as (in some cases) adults. O'Neill's others works include *Almost Love* – her first novel for adults (2018) – and *After the Silence* (2020), her most recent book for adults. Central to all of O'Neill's works of fiction is their protagonist's negotiation of identity in and against sexist hierarchies. A more detailed introduction to the novels focused on in this dissertation follows later in this chapter. O'Neill's more recent YA novel, *The Surface Breaks*, resonates with her radical views on perceived systemic violence against women and with radical feminist views of power evident in some feminist criticism that aims to undermine female congeniality and submissiveness in order to promote anger as a political weapon for change. As such, it is relevant to this dissertation and referred to where relevant; however, to facilitate a thorough analysis of both *Only Ever Yours* and *Asking For It*, I do not analyse *The Surface Breaks* in great detail.

O'Neill's status as both an author and a cultural commentator with an extra-textual presence is examined in greater detail later in this introductory chapter. However, O'Neill's position as a public figure and political activist and her dual position as a YA author and adult author are relevant to my analysis of the liminal nature of YA literature and the expansiveness

of the possible political influence of O'Neill's works. O'Neill is a writer whose work is read by young adults, as well as adults, and who also writes for adults in newspapers and across other media. She appears at festivals, talks and events around the world and, as of March 2021, had 33.6K followers on Twitter. These other facets contribute to O'Neill's extra-textual presence, which is key to my analysis of the works. Peritextual aspects of the texts, such as afterwords and back matter, which provide details of O'Neill's personal experiences and research and refer the reader to specific organisations, are explicitlyand frequently engaged with in this dissertation, especially in relation as to how they factor into the marketing and reception of O'Neill's books and her construction of her authorial identity.

1. iii. *Literary Context and Critical and Theoretical Approach*

This dissertation examines the relationship between O'Neill's feminist perspective, revealed in both her texts and her extra-textual rhetoric, and a wide range of criticism and theories around power, most specifically feminism and post-structuralism, and, more generally, gender theory, theories of masculinity, posthumanism, and eco-criticism. I draw on contrasting approaches to illustrate a spectrum of views and the persistent tensions within feminist thought and criticism. This dissertation takes an intersectional approach to interrogate accounts of "rape culture" in populist feminist theory, discourse, and literature byexamining how gender, sex, class, race and other individual characteristics intersect and overlap. Insight into the history and culture of feminism shows how historical and modern contexts have influenced O'Neill's novels' overall themes and emphasises the contradictory nature of the works' relationship with feminist theory. Feminist theories of power – established and emerging – are considered, including first-wave feminists' rights-based concerns, second and third-wave feminist writers' concerns with social equality, and radical feminists' analyses of domination as bound up closely with gender.

The main theoretical framework comes from the relationship between post-

structuralist and feminist conceptions of language, gender and violence. The analysis of several feminist theorists in relation to appropriating Michel Foucault's work on power, the body and sexuality for feminist ends are considered. Lois McNay's criticism of Sandra Bartky's feminist approach to Foucault's theory of the docile body is particularly relevant to my analysis of O'Neill's problematic construction of female bodies as passive victims of systems of patriarchal domination and male bodies as free from experiences of the disciplinary techniques that subject women. O'Neill depicts pressures on contemporary women as analogous with second-wave feminist Simone De Beauvoir's theory of gender as a construct in *The Second Sex* (c1952) and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* in the 90s. It is argued that O'Neill's contemporary frame of reference and the significant developments that have occurred since the origins of these theories confounds such a correlation. Third-wave feminist Naomi Wolf's theory of The Beauty Myth (1991) is drawn upon to examine the validity of presenting the primary delineation for discrimination against women as beauty in the twenty-first century – as O'Neill depicts. I argue that men as well as women are vulnerable to the enduring legacy of the "cultural conspiracy" of The Beauty Myth in its repackaged form, which Jia Tolentino terms the "lifestyle myth" and describes as increasingly closely bound up with technology and money (2019, 81).

Despite being published in an era when a resurgence of feminism has changed the landscape of how feminist ideology is articulated in popular culture, O'Neill's depictions of teenagers exclude the rebelliousness that has characterised young people's feminist activist energy in recent years. O'Neill's oversimplified construction of a post-feminist era does not fully enough address "the paradoxes of a late-twentieth and early twenty-first-century setting" that, according to Stephanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon (2009) is more "varied and even incongruous" than previously seen (7). O'Neill's works do not reflect Angela McRobbie's and Roxane Gay's exploration of the complexities and ironies of post-feminism in the first and second decade of the twenty-first century in "Post-feminism and popular

culture" (2018, 255- 264) and *Bad Feminist: Essays* (2014, 5-7) respectively. Complexity is especially not afforded to men characters in O'Neill's works mainly because the texts are so devoted to critiquing women's subordination that they fail to analyse the intersections between sexism and other forms of oppression. Characterisation, especially of men and boys, is largely stereotypical, making it difficult for the reader to forge empathy and understanding. It is also contradictory to the critical evaluation of harmful stereotypes on women and girls effected across the works.

While facets of these feminist theories remain relevant today, they are not straightforwardly applicable to the contemporary Euro-centric, middle-class context in which O'Neill places them. bell hooks's[1] recognition of power's intersectionality in *Feminist theory: From Margin to Centre* (1984) is integral to my analysis of the dangers of giving one form of oppression precedence over others in O'Neill's works. In 1984, hooks argued that acknowledgement of the interrelatedness of various forms of oppression was essential to the fight against sexism and exploitation of all people (*Feminist* 31). Feminist critics Angela McRobbie, Dongxiao Qin and others have developed hooks's argument that the notion of "common oppression" in much White, bourgeoise feminism is a "false and corrupt platform disguising the true nature of women's varied and complex social reality" (44). Mc Robbie recognises the dearth of recognition of the "ongoing existence of deep and pernicious gender inequity" concerning age, class, and race in feminist writing and popular culture (261). Qin warns that insisting on gender as theroot of all oppression can lead to women's sense of "self-in-relation" being shaped by gendered culture in a way that is "abstract from many other critical cultural elements embedded in a larger sociocultural structure" (2004, 299). The way that these feminist critics discuss the need for critical analysis of differences among diverse groups of women while recognising that "women are

[1] Born Gloria Jean Watkins, hooks uses the "lower- case pen name" to maintain a focus on the ideas in her work "as opposed to who she is" (berea.edu). Her name is in lower case throughout this dissertation.

the group most victimised by sexist oppression" (hooks, 43) supports my argument about the problematic nature of O'Neill's overly simplified depiction of all women as oppressed.

O'Neill's political agenda owes much to the values and concerns held and developed by gender theorists who assert that gender as a learned construct has harmful effects on women and girls, and radical American feminist writers and thinkers who conceive of modern Western civilisation as a patriarchy in need of a revision of power. I argue that O'Neill's depiction of Ireland as having a "rape culture" adds to intransigent, sensationalised popular discourse on the topic like that in the contemporary feminist writings of Kate Harding, Laura Bates, and Jessica Valenti. Harding's *Asking For It* (2015) Bates's *The Everyday Sexism Project* (launched in 2012) and Valenti's *Full Frontal Feminism* (2017) conflate all violence against women with rape and argue that all women live in fear of rape or death at the hands of men. Consequently, Andrea Dworkin's and Suzanna Walters' radical views on ending perceived systemic violence against women, and Marilyn Frye's notion of the systemic "birdcage" of sexism (1983, 10) are also a fundamental part of this dissertation's theoretical framework. Contemporary feminists Caitlin Moran and Anna Arrowsmith provide a counter-argument to Catherine A. MacKinnon's and Andrea Dworkin's radical anti-pornography text, *Pornography and Civil Rights* (1988) which argued that pornography encourages and excuses the act of rape.

Theories of masculinity are also essential to contextualising the arguments formed in this dissertation. I consider critical re-evaluations of White heterosexual "laddism" or "lad culture" as a problematic form of masculinity. Paul Willis used the term "lads" in his 1977 sociological study, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, to describe a group of White, working-class youths whose behaviour was anti-school. Becky Francis finds that those aspects of male behaviour that contribute to "laddism" in British school settings ("humour, defiance, strength, bravery, competition and brutality") are due to wider society's, not just men's, "investments of desire in traditional constructions of

masculinity" (1999, 369).

According to Carolyn Jackson, "laddism" is related to boys' "fear of the feminine" (2003, 583). These aspects of masculinity have been framed by many critics, including Laura Bates and Kate Harding, as contributing to the cultivation ofa culture of rape (organised and upheld by men) in Western society. I mostly draw upon critics who advocate for a theoretical reframing around "lad culture" and "rape culture" that includes increased intersectional and context-specific analysis, most specifically concerning class and race. Recent scholarship by Alison Phipps et al. and Kitty Nichols offers nuanced discussion on new ways of understanding sexism and gender relations. Similar to this dissertation, Phipps et al. and Nichols interrogate and undermine the totalising nature of the category "laddism" (Nichols 2018, 78) and the terms "laddish culture" and "rape culture" (Phipps et al., "Rape Culture", 2017, 5). Peggy Orenstein's *Boys and Sex* is also particularlyrelevant. *Boys and Sex* (2020) is a discussion on sex, porn, and navigating the "new masculinity", in which Orenstein discusses pressures on boys concerning gender conventions as similarly damaging to those on girls – which she had previously emphasised in *Girls and Sex*, published in 2016.

O'Neill's works imagine the body as a pliable entity for social control and industrial production. The reactionary, intransigent production of feminism, so concerned with undoing essentialism in O'Neill's works, is contrary to the development of feminist theory as active and progressive evident in some of the theories I have referred to above. It is also out-of-step with developments in ecofeminist and material feminist theory. In comparison, more recent works by the other Irish women writers of YA fiction explored in this dissertation, Sullivan, Griffin, and Fowley Doyle, increasingly take the physicality of the body and the material, natural world into account in correlation with the development of feminist theory. I consult a range of eco-feminist and post-humanist analyses of YA literature, including Alice Curry's *Environmental Crisis in Young Adult Fiction* (2013) and the collections *Posthumanism in Young Adult Fiction* (2018) and *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction* (2014)

edited by Anita Tarr and Donna R. White, and Sara K. Day et al. respectively. In doing so, I analyse how materialfeminist theory and its relationship with eco-feminism, regarding relationships between people, the natural world, and gendering – and its related concerns of posthumanism, neoliberalism and critical race theory – are significant to Irish YA literature.

Emphasis on intersections between feminism and youth culture in the contemporary YA literature considered in this dissertation, and O'Neill's works, in particular, means that the study of the works goes beyond a consideration of theory and always returns to an examination of their relationship to culture and society. Analysis of O'Neill's texts concerning broader media, such as social media, is used to extend the critical discussion about YA literature's role in reflecting and examining girls' behaviours in broader ideological and cultural contexts.

1. iv. *Significance of the Research*

This dissertation offers a contemporary critical space to discuss writers who are voicing the Ireland of the twenty-first century. Discussions about "rape culture" and the intersections between feminism and power are at the forefront of contemporary thinking. Although other scholarly works engage with similar topics, within the context of Irish YA literature and culture, the topic has not received major scholarly attention to date, meaning that this work is an entirely new and original research area in Irish YA literature studies. This dissertation examines two consistently under-researched areas: contemporary Irish YA literature and critical responses to "rape culture". It offers an original perspective on twenty-first-century youth literature and a valuable contribution to YA scholarship by bringing together feminist theory and Irish YA literature. My examination of "rape culture" and its capacity to entrench gendered binary oppositions is provocative, timely and necessary. The position the works hold as YA works make it likely that they could introduce feminist theory to young readers. Furthermore, the likelihood of O'Neill's *Asking For It* being used in educational settings to

discuss consent is high, especially in Ireland (an education pack aimed at second-level students accompanied the Abbey Theatre production of the play in 2018), which makes the fresh critical attention brought to bear on O'Neill's texts in this dissertation all the more important. This research is relevant, not just to YA and children's literature studies, but across a range of disciplines, including gender-sexuality-and-culture studies, literature, feminist cultural studies, and media studies.

More broadly, this dissertation locates Irish YA literature as a powerful and, as yet, unresearched site of rich literary and cultural significance. Building on existing scholarship, which promotes YA literature as literature with its own specific set of concerns deserving of research – and with a purpose beyond that of an educational tool for social issues, or a gateway to adult literature – this dissertation validates Irish YA literature's position within the literary tradition and the legitimacy of its value as an area of scholarship.

1. v. *Chapter Overview*

Chapter One: Author, Texts and Contexts contextualises developments in Irish children's and young adult literature by discussing cultural and political matters of significance concerning women's rights and intersectional equality in Ireland, and internationally, at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century. I provide a brief history of Irish and American YA literature, from which its liminal nature as a genre is explored, while taking the significance of YA literature's dual audience of young adults and adults into consideration. I examine current conceptualisations of adolescence and the developing presence of theoretically oriented criticism devoted to YA literature. This chapter explores the role O'Neill and the other Irish YA writers discussed in this dissertation play in addressing issues previously omitted from the Irish YA tradition. Intersections in O'Neill's work with historical and current feminist criticism and culture are investigated. It is argued that the popularisation of feminist ideology in youth literature and culture has resulted in works like O'Neill's not

being afforded the depth of critical attention that they deserve. Within the context of recent momentous social change concerning feminist issues in Ireland, and internationally, it may be tempting to interpret the wave of feminist children's and young adult literature, and O'Neill's in particular, as unilaterally progressive and enlightened. It is also possible that these texts are not held to the same standards as other texts, particularly those authored by men writers, because of women's historical exclusion from the literary canon in Ireland. This chapter warns against this.

Chapter Two: Louise O'Neill's Works of YA Literature and Feminist Writing questions how O'Neill's works facilitate liberation for the reader in terms of gender. Michel Foucault's social theory of disciplinary power and the docile body provides the theoretical lens for interrogating depictions of domination and passivity, and agency and resistance in *Only Ever Yours* and *Asking For It*. This chapter argues that the presence of "the author" in the texts has a reductive effect resulting in an unbalanced representation of individuals (for example, men and boy characters) and collective groups (for example, young girls, older women). Irish and international YA texts that re-think subjectivity for women and girls and present the body as a site for resistance are closely examined in this chapter. The international YA works analysed alongside O'Neill's texts are *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces* (2014) by Isabel Quintero and *Killing Aurora* (1999) by Helen Barnes. The Irish YA novels are Siobhán Dowd's *A Swift Pure Cry* (2006) and Moïra Fowley-Doyle's *All the Bad Apples* (2019). In contrast with O'Neill's texts, these works provide representations of girlhood that stress the possibility of selfhood undiminished by circumstance and depict various ways that girl characters oppose, adapt, and rebel against the structures that surround them. This chapter argues that despite these other authors explicit concerns with interrogating oppressive gender conventions and, in the case of the Irish writers, with Ireland's historical legacy of oppressing women, their texts are future-oriented: they support readers in adopting a critical stance, thereby activating the readers' potential as agents of social and cultural

change. My critique of O'Neill's works in this chapter widens out to broader criticism of aspects of feminist theory and criticism, as well as other research on female power in YA literature, that similarly does not interrogate these issues thoroughly enough or that counterproductively confirms traditional stereotypes.

The broader cultural context informed by the "Me Too" era and its double-sided reformist-energy, which has the capacity for both tolerance and progression, as well as extremism and prejudice, is central to my analysis of O'Neill's *Asking For It* – the text and the play adaptation – in Chapter Three: Liberating or Limiting? "Rape Culture" and Consent in *Asking For It*. This chapter analyses tensions at work in the contemporary cultural discourse around "rape culture" and how this is engaged with in O'Neill's text *Asking For It* and in the other YA texts. Contradictions evident in *Asking For It* are reflective of those found in theory that debates "rape culture", and are demonstrative of unresolved conflicts that require continued debate on the issue of sexual violence and consent in Irish culture.

The due deliberation that is given to problematic areas and tensions as well as to the accomplishments of *Asking For It* regarding the issues broached in this chapter is especially vital because *Asking For It* and its surrounding peritextual elements and formats are likely to become increasingly used in Irish educational settings. This makes it all the more essential that the argument that a culture of rape is rigidly systemic in Irish society is critically examined – especially in light of critique of the concept in American and international debate and criticism. Comparisons with American YA texts that similarly explore gendered violence in relation to broader culture highlight how the recognition of systemic sexism need not preclude agency and individual choice. American YA author, Isabel Quintero's *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces* powerfully situates the individual as the site of knowledge and value despite his/her surrounding socio-cultural structures. This chapter maintains that O'Neill's works fail to recognise the lurking potential for extremism within the concept of "rape culture". It is argued that her works are in danger of endorsing a puritan appraisal of sexual relations that is

damaging to female agency and dangerously limiting in its classification of men.

Feminism, Capitalist Technological Conquest, and Ecology in *Only Ever Yours* and Other Contemporary Irish YA Works is the title of Chapter Four. The cautionary tale O'Neill attempts to tell with *Only Ever Yours* is chiefly to do with gender-based discrimination. The text offers a fictional forewarning about the possible destructive impact of technological advancements on not only civilisation but also humanity, specifically the female body. This chapter considers the text's other warnings about how technology, particularly social media and human enhancements, can create radical inequalities and impinge on free-will and democracy. O'Neill's concentration on technological advancements as destructive to the human body in *Only Ever Yours* is compared with Sarah Maria Griffin's exploration of the potential to reconceptualise humanity through technology in *Spare and Found Parts* (2016). It is argued that the hybridity of Griffin's post-apocalyptic characters differs from O'Neill's non- or post-human eves because, despite their non-human augmentations, their embodied nature suggests the power of female agency. This chapter considers the emphasis on the materiality of the natural body as a source of potential and power in Griffin's subsequent *Other Words for Smoke* (2019), Deirdre Sullivan's *Perfectly Preventable Deaths* (2019) and Moïra FowleyDoyle's *All the Bad Apples* – all works of magical realism that reflect the "material turn" in feminist theory. This "material turn" considers nature as "more than a passive social construction" and rather an "agentic force that intersects with and changes the other elements in the mix including the human" (Alaimo and Heckman 2018, 6). It is argued that intersections between feminism, capitalist technological conquest and ecology in Griffin's, Sullivan's and Fowley-Doyle's works reveal more complex responsiveness to young girls' problems than the overt emphasis on suffering social injustice based on sex and gender alone evident in O'Neill's works. Like O'Neill, these other authors make connections to real-world events anduse paratextual elements, such as authors notes to create a political discourse between author and young reader. This chapter questions whether efforts to

mediate history and shape the reader's understanding outside of the text might hinder more than enhance the reader's experience of the texts as works of literature.

The concluding chapter argues that the theoretical starting point out of which radical feminist theory emerges – the notion that the oppression of women is the most universal and fundamental oppression, and that it comes outof patriarchy – is carried through in all of O'Neill's works. In each setting – dystopian, realistic, and fairy tale – the social components – family, groups and institutions, values, roles, and norms – are all constructed as instruments of patriarchal domination. Considering the works' potential impact on contemporary gender relations, this chapter argues that O'Neill's totalising, radical approach requires more critical examination. The Conclusion argues that O'Neill's works are entangled within certain strains of extreme feminism driven by an agenda to agitate gender conflict that result in the concepts of gender equality and women empowerment losing their meaning.

Louise O'Neill

2. **i.** ***Overview of O'Neill's Works***

> "All eves are created to be perfect … but you must take the necessary steps to improve yourself. There is always room for improvement"
>
> *Audio Guide to the Rules for Proper female Behaviour, the Original Father*
> (O'Neill, *Only Ever Yours, 53*)

Interviewed for Children's Books Ireland in 2017, O'Neill said "it was a deliberate decision to make *Only Ever Yours* a feminist work. From the moment that I had the idea – a school in which girls are bred for their beauty – it was obvious to me that this book would be exploring issues that affect women" (qtd. in Redmond 2019). Drawing heavily on Margaret Atwood's adult dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) O'Neill's *Only Ever Yours* imagines a post-apocalyptic dystopia. Women's bodies have evolved to reject thefemale foetus in the

womb. Girls – or "eves" – are created by genetic engineers and trained in"Schools" to be beautiful and subservient. O'Neill's text draws on global forms of gender discrimination to provide a dystopian warning about the objectification, commodification andmaltreatment of the female body to highlight a need to confront gender-based inequalities in (chiefly Western) contemporary society. O'Neill's and Atwood's novels have shared concerns with feminist issues, and both use a dystopian narrative to offer social critiques of real-life practices concerning women's reproductive and bodily autonomy.

O'Neill describes holding *The Handmaid's Tale* "close" to her "heart like a talisman" as a teenager ("My Journey" 18). This admiration for Atwood's novel is apparent in O'Neill's use of imagery, language and world-building. *Only Ever Yours*' setting – in which Zones are governed by an authoritarian man, the Original Father – very closely resembles Gilead, Atwood's patriarchal dystopia in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In *Only Ever Yours*, each eve is selected by an "Inheritant" – a male suitor – to be a companion (a wife and mother), a concubine (a sexual slave) or a chastity (a teacher). In Atwood's Gilead, women are comparably categorised according to their usefulness to men as respectable – but infertile – wives, as fertile concubines, or as household maids or "Marthas". Women who are insurgent or no longer useful within any category are "unwomen", sent to the Colonies to die. In *Only Ever Yours* "girls who break the rules" are sent Underground (390). Atwood's influence is so unmistakably evident in *Only Ever Yours* that it warrants an interrogation into what extent O'Neill's novel rehashes, develops or transcends Atwood's ideas in *The Handmaid's Tale.* Irish broadcaster, Rick O'Shea acknowledges that O'Neill's novel "takes more than a little inspiration" from *The Handmaid's Tale* but is impressed that the novel is "not just YA" but "top-grade speculative fiction" (rickoshea.ie). O'Shea's admiration suggests a lack of understanding of the YA genre; it also indicates how the narrative closeness of O'Neill's novel with Atwood's has largely been overlooked.

Critic Juan F. Elices, for example, situates O'Neill alongside Margaret Atwood and Irish feminist dystopian authors, such as Eilís Ní Dhuibhne, who write for adults. According to Elices, O'Neill has played a significant role in revitalising the "state of dystopia in Ireland" (2016, 74), evident in the "favourable reviews and sales" of the genre in recent years (76). He acknowledges *Only Ever Yours* as YA fiction but suggests that he sees her novel as fitting uneasily into the genre and sharing more characteristics with adult fiction. Elices refers to Ann Childs's argument that "dystopian fiction written for young readers differs from adult dystopia in fundamental ways" (2014, 187). Childs delineates dystopian fiction for young readers from adult dystopia because of its "in-text hope that the oppressive regime can be successfully undermined, preparing the reader for whatever flawed world they inherit outside the book" (187). Elices notes that there is "no such hopeful" resolution in *Only Ever Yours*, therefore aligning it more with adult dystopia, which, according to Childs, communicates the message that "this terrible future must be prevented before it is too late" (187).

Only Ever Yours echoes Margaret Atwood's adult feminist dystopian fiction, which has considerable and lasting literary weight and political influence; it has been received by critics as more characteristic of adult dystopia than young adult dystopia; and O'Neill herself positions the text as feminist and highly relevant to women today. These are significant factors in this dissertation's analysis of the novels' political and cultural significance in and outside of the young adult fiction genre. *Only Ever Yours* was re-published in an adult edition in the hopes (according to O'Neill) that it would "receive more space in high street book shops", and be "reviewed more widely" ("Pushing the Boundaries"). Her second novel, *Asking For It*, was also subsequently released in an adult edition.

Writing for *The Irish Times* in 2015 about her inspiration for *Asking For It*, O'Neill

described two cases of sexual assault and rape that took place in America in Steubenville (Ohio) and Maryville (Missouri) in 2012 and 2013 respectively: both involved teenage drinking, football players in a small town, alleged rape and sexual assault caught on video, and Twitter and Facebook harassment of the victims. The cases sparked conversation about what was described as "rape culture" because of how the sexual assault and the perpetrators' bragging were publicly documented on social media, and how the victim's responsibility was questioned. O'Neill saw parallels between the blame placed on the victims in the American cases and the reactions on social media to images of a teenage-girl performing an oral-sex act on a teenage boy at a music concert in Ireland in 2013. According to O'Neill, this incident, referred to as "Slane Girl" in the papers and online, was, "indicative of a deeply ingrained double standard" about sexuality in Irish society ("Unblurring"). This moved her to consider what might happen if a case like the Steubenville or Maryville case were to occur in an Irish context:

> "Would that community do the right thing, would they know that rape is always the fault of the rapist, that it has nothing to do with what the victim was wearing, or how much she had to drink? Or would they turn their faces away, whispering under their breath about how she was a slut, how she had sex with anyone who wanted her, how they always knew she was asking for it?"
>
> (O'Neill, "Unblurring")

Asking For It tells the story of eighteen-year-old Emma, who is the victim of a "brutal sexual assault" (O'Neill, "Birmingham Literary Festival"). Four boys sexually assault Emma at a party after a Gaelic football game in her local town of Balinatoom, County Cork. Her assault is shared on social media, and Emma is blamed for her rape because she was drunk and wearing revealing clothing. Emma's community and family do not see her as a victim, but as being to blame.

Emma initiates sexual behaviour with Paul but then says that they should stop and go back to the party. Paul calls her a "fucking cock-tease" and although Emma says "wait… Wait, I don't feel" – further indicating her lack of consent – he "pushes" her down, "yanks"

her underwear aside, and penetrates her without a condom (107). Details about how Paul's eyes were "dark" when he was "watching" Emma earlier, and about he did not take drugs but gave them to Emma could suggest his lust for her and a lack of interest in drugs. However, in line with what follows, these details are more likely to suggest his predatory behaviour and the premeditation of the assault. Paul unlocks the bedroom door (that Emma had earlier locked) while Emma is still naked. When the other boys enter the room, Paul makes an "oops face" and grabs Emma up to standing, saying "Look at her" and then "goes to lock the door again" (112). Following this, Emma takes more drugs and the next day wakes up sunburnt on her front porch with no memory of what has happened apart from "voices", "laughing", and "hands grabbing" at her (122).

When Emma goes to school on Monday, the girls call her "disgusting" for having had sex with "four guys in one night" (132). When she gets home, "bruises" are "blossoming" around her neck and it hurts to urinate. Looking at her lower body in the mirror, she notices "its chaffed, red raw", and the same bruising pattern is "dotted on her inner thighs" (144). Still, Emma does not consider or accept that what happened to her was rape. She tells herself, "Paul must have liked it rough; I had sex with Paul" (144). Other details surface in Emma's memory: she recalls a voice saying, "lads, I don't know if this is such a good idea" (144). Nevertheless, it isn't until she opens her Facebook page that she realises the full extent of the assault and who else was involved. Details about Emma's head "lolling back on the pillow" and not moving as the boys roughly manipulate her body, sexually abuse her, and urinate on her make it explicitly and categorically clear that Emma was physically incapable of showing her non-consent (146).

Dylan and Paul work together to position and assault Emma; however, the text does suggest some ambiguity concerning the other two boys' complicity in her sexual assault. Fitzy stands at the edge of the room; his face "queasy", suggesting that he considers

interceding or grapples with his complicity (he is the only one who does not touch Emma). Sean is "bleary-eyed" and vomits after he "rolls" off Emma (148). Fitzy takes the camera at this point but only to take a photograph of Sean vomiting and Dylan and Paul kneeling beside him, laughing. Disappointingly, neither these subtleties nor the boys' characters are nuanced or developed enough in the text to offer a significant examination of the boys' accounts. With *Asking For It*, O'Neill highlights how misogynistic language, objectification and sexualisation of women in media, and pornification in mainstream culture, can contribute to a social environment in which misogyny and gendered violence are prevalent and excused. While ostensibly about social transformation and empowering girls, the novel's insistence that these aspects contribute to boys' ill-treatment or abuse of girls and to girls' own low opinion or abuse of themselves is concerning. O'Neill's ideological righteousness takes on aconcerning edge in her alarming argument about men and boys' alleged inherent violence.

Power in *The Surface Breaks* – O'Neill's feminist re-telling of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" – is depicted as belonging to men and denied to women. Gaia, the Little Mermaid, is trapped by her restrictive society, her overbearing father and abusive, intended-husband Zane (a sexually violent predator), as well as by the ghost of her dead mother. Power exists inside women, but they are unaware of it. It is "buried so deep" that women think it is "lost forever" (loc. 3065). Gaia is urged by the sea witch to "show the women how to reclaim their powers" (loc. 3065). When she does gain power over her father, Gaia is ruthless and cruel. Gaia sews her father's lips "shut with black thread" and sinks him tohis death. Thinking of Zane, she imagines her revenge against him and all of the Mermen with pleasure: "my mouth waters at the thought of it, of what I will do to him. What I will do to them all" (loc. 3205).

In her afterword to *The Surface Breaks*, O'Neill describes feeling a "responsibility", similar to "the driving force behind *Only Ever Yours*", to ensure that the "next generation of girls coming of age would not fall prey to some of the same dangers" that she had (361). She

describes how as a young girl, "starving" herself "to the point of hospitalisation in order to meet society's arbitrary standards of beauty", she began to question whether her love for the Disney version of "The Little Mermaid" had contributed to her "desperate desire to be thin and beautiful" (361). Published in 2018 by Scholastic, the book was promoted in a significantly more adult way than her earlier works. A spokesperson for the US publisher of the book said of *The Surface Breaks*, "Christian Andersen's dark, original fairy tale is reimagined through a searing feminist lens, with the stunning, scalpel-sharp writing and world building that has won Louise her legions of devoted fans" (Doyle, "Louise O'Neill takes on"). Comments like this – made by the book's publisher – and stickers with "not suitable for younger readers" added to the texts cover, suggest how O'Neill's young adult fiction is increasingly presented and marketed for older teenagers and adults. Although marketing YA texts in this way is not unusual today, it does suggest the significant role that YA literature plays in contributing to and influencing debates relevant to an adult readership – in this instance, those to do with feminism.

As already mentioned, critics, readers, and O'Neill herself, often position *Only Ever Yours* alongside *The Handmaid's Tale*. Similarly, O'Neill describes her modern version of "The Little Mermaid" as a "reclaiming" rather than a "re-telling" – implying that she thinks of herself as an author with enough literary weight to access a previously untold truth in the story. Comments O'Neill made about reading Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) when discussing and promoting the book further demonstrate a shift in her work and personas as she moves into adult literature. By calling attention to Carter's feminist re-writing of fairy tales in this way, O'Neill lends her version of "The Little Mermaid" a certain authority as a feminist text, which is likely to increase its appeal for adults. Situating herself within a tradition of writers like Carter, whose literary-psychoanalytical approach uncovered the latent sexual violence in fairy tales, lends O'Neill a particular literary weight. These aspects accentuate the political and radical potential of O'Neill's reworking of "The Little Mermaid"

and her move into adult literature.

Almost Love, O'Neill's adult-fiction debut, was published in 2018, the same year as *The Surface Breaks*. Although *Almost Love* features a protagonist in her mid-twenties, the novel also features many characteristics of Kimberley Reynolds's definition of a YA text. Reynolds's *Radical Children's Literature* (2007) provides an important analysis of the place of children's and young adult literature, and children and young adults, in culture. *Almost Love* is characterised by how its protagonist, Sarah, is "caught up in the turbulent and complex emotions associated with the teenage years"; it addresses "readers presumed to be in this state of turmoil"; and, it calls "attention to a division between an 'authentic' inner self and a 'false' public self" (*Radical* 72). *Almost Love* could arguably be better categorised as new adult (NA fiction) – a developing sub-category of YA written for and about young adults in their early twenties. Conversely, it could be considered a natural extension of O'Neill's first two texts because of the commonality of subject matter and themes.

The novel narrates Sarah's story, an unhappy teacher who begins an unhealthily obsessive affair with a dubiously manipulative older man. Their relationship – based around Sarah simultaneously pretending she is happy with casual sex and yearning for commitment – results in her suffering and sadness. Two pages of internal monologue made up of "I should have"/"I should never have" resonate with O'Neill's young adult protagonists in *Only Ever Yours* and *Asking For It*: freida and Emma respectively. Sarah's admonishment for being neither reluctant nor seductive enough is very similar to how both freida and Emma grapple with contradictory expectations concerning their sexuality. *Almost Love* looks at grey areas around consent in a manner that emulates a work of adult fiction by an author O'Neill admires. In *Almost Love,* Sarah degrades and debases herself in her relationship with Matthew in a way that echoes Chris Kraus's protagonist in *I Love Dick* (1997). Discussing *Almost Love,* with the *Irish Times* journalist, Una Mullaly, in 2018 O'Neill said that she "recognised aspects of herself" in Kraus's protagonist. She said that this prompted her to

consider why intelligent,capable women “act crazy” in relationships (“The Hardest Place”). O’Neill’s *Almost Love* offers a more one-dimensional depiction of obsessive love than Kraus’s, which takes factors outside of gender into account concerning power dynamics. Mullaly does not consider this, nor does she question O’Neill’s statement about women “acting crazy” in relationships. Even more concerningly, Mullaly cites O’Neill’s declaration during a speech to Trinity College University students unproblematically, during which O’Neill says that “the hardest place” forher to “maintain” her “feminism is within a relationship with a straight man”. The lack of scrutiny that O’Neill’s provocative comment – diminishing of both feminism and straight men – receives is troubling (“The Hardest Place”). Although a full investigation into O’Neill’s adult literature is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is important to mention them because of how they propagate the ideology in her YA texts, and because of how theyhave been similarly celebrated in literary and cultural spaces.

Most recently, in 2020, O’Neill published another adult novel, *After the Silence* – a psychological crime thriller – billed as a first foray into a new style of writing and a shift away from the young adult genre. Although her second novel specifically for adults, *After the Silence,* marks a more significant departure into adult publishing because of its considerably better commercial success and critical reception. Like *Asking For It,* the book centres on a timely theme: coercive domestic abuse. Broadened definitions of domestic abuse have become a more prominent area for discussion and debate in Irish society since the first conviction of a man for coercive control, intimidation and multiple assaults on his former partner took place by trial in Ireland in November 2020. O’Neill’s latest novel further suggests her capacity for creating fiction that captures the cultural climate of its era in terms of its relationship with contemporary feminist concerns. How this affects her works’ reception is considered in more detail later in this chapter and throughout the dissertation.

2. ii. *Background and Upbringing*

Many notable social changes occurred within the span of O'Neill's generation in Ireland. Growing mistrust and increasing secularisation meant that the Catholic Church's influence in most spheres of Irish life had waned significantly. By the time O'Neill had reached her mid-thirties, Ireland's status as a liberal country had progressed: divorce, same-sex marriage and abortion had all been legalised. The Eighth Amendment – signed into law in 1983, two years before O'Neill was born – was removed, and abortion legalised, by the time O'Neill was thirty-three, in 2018. Homosexuality was decriminalised in 1993, when O'Neill was eight years old, and same-sex marriage legalised by the time she was thirty, in 2015. Writing for *The New York Times* in 2015, Irish journalist Fintan O'Toole contends that these momentous changes made Ireland "notable for its transformation from a country holding overwhelmingly conservative attitudes towards LGBT issues to one holding overwhelmingly liberal ones". The article further described Ireland as having left behind "the culture of silence and deference to religious authority that long dominated it".

Born in 1985, O'Neill grew up in the Republic of Ireland in Clonakilty, West Cork. Unless otherwise stated, references to Ireland throughout apply to the Republic, not Northern Ireland. The dichotomous nature of progress/regress in Irish social politics typified her childhood and adolescence. Five years before O'Neill was born, contraception was legalised under substantial restrictions. It would be another ten years until divorce was to be legalised, in 1990 – again, under restrictions still being contested today. Condom sales were liberalized the year she was born, but it was not until 1993 that laws restricting their sale were overruled.

Increased female presence in Irish politics in the 90s might have encouraged young Irish girls like O'Neill to consider a broader set of future possibilities; it is also likely to have highlighted the inequity of gender in Irish positions of power. Mary Robinson became the first female Irish president in 1990; Mary Harney became the first woman to lead a political party in the Dáil (the Irish house of parliament) in 1993 and the first female Táiniste (deputy

prime minister of the Republic of Ireland) in 1997 – to date no woman has ever been appointed Taoiseach. In 1997, the year Mary McAleese became the second woman president of Ireland,and Mary Robinson took on a global position of influence as the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, O'Neill was twelve. It was at this age that O'Neill recalls having experienced sexual assault: "I remember these guys walking past and one of them brushed his hand against my breast and said, "Oh look at the t*** on that". And I was 12, I was a child" ("Asking for Answers"). Looking back on this experience from an adult perspective, O'Neill may have felt that the public, political progress that characterised her childhood and adolescence was mired by resistance and conflict at a more tangible, personal level, and contributed to her concern as a writer with exposing a lengthy legacy of misogyny in Ireland.

The depiction of Ireland in O'Neill's *Asking For It*, published in 2015, does not represent the liberal attitudes or "quiet revolution" that Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Leo Varadkar said, in 2018, had been "taking place in Ireland over the last couple of decades" (antaisce.org). The construction of Ireland and Irishness in the text is more in keeping with O'Neill's 2019 description of Ireland as a country "built on secrets" and the Irish as a "people broken by shame and silence" ("Today I feel"). This construal echoes Irish journalist Una Mullaly's argument that "guilt and shame and secrecy" has added to the "collusion in how women's bodies have been policed – how lives have been destroyed, sometimes ended; how women in Ireland have been systematically punished for daring to be sexual beings" (2018, loc. 84). O'Neill, a self-professed lapsed Catholic, describes her childhood as one "steeped in religion" ("It's funny"). The tensions and contradictions at work in contemporary Ireland, in which increasing ideological diversity exists, alongside the legacy of Catholic nationalism and continued strong religious belief, are fundamental considerations in O'Neill's fiction.

The details of O'Neill's upbringing suggest that although her texts draw on global forms of gender discrimination to highlight a universal need to confront gender-based

inequalities, some of its key warnings can – and ought to – be read as related to Ireland and Irishness specific to the time in which they are set as well as with Ireland's recent history. Such a reading allows for careful analysis of the substantial criticism of the Irish State and church (both construed as powerfully patriarchal) in her texts and cast as conspirators of Ireland's "very long and chequered history of policing female sexuality and female bodies" (*The Late Late*). It also allows for a consideration of the relevance of such a construction to contemporary Ireland's increasingly secularised society, in which the Catholic Church's influence has significantly waned, and feminist and essentialist consumerist ideologies have become important. It asks how O'Neill's texts have/will play a part in social change in Ireland, and – amid that change – whether her texts too heavily depict the kind of Ireland now becoming consigned to the past. Moreover, it allows for an interrogation of O'Neill's texts in light of the political and societal influences on her writing for young adults during a time in Ireland that Fiona McCann and Nathalie Sebbane contend is bound up with the complexities of post-feminism: "although Irish women may have rightly felt liberated from the weight of religion, they now have to struggle against the weight of an essentialist and consumerist discourse which threatens to annihilate a fight for rights that they (in some cases) have never really obtained" (2018, 2).

How *Asking For It* brings the convolutions of this situation into focus is analysed in chapters Two and Three. While O'Neill's fiction presents matters concerning the silencing of women and the maltreatment of their bodies as integral to Ireland's cultural history, her critique of the sexist notions embedded in (chiefly Catholic) religious dogma is only one aspect of her work. While O'Neill's texts engage most obviously with longstanding issues challenging modern feminism today – violence against women, social discrimination, inequality in the division of labour in the home, and sexism – they also pay close attention to the role of social media, and the media in general, in exacerbating them, which is explored in greater detail in Chapter Four.

2. iii. *Public Figure, Political Activist, Feminist*

Many aspects of O'Neill's texts implore that they be read as social criticism. O'Neill's intention to use literature as a tool for systematic reflection on society and societal behaviour is evident in the overt politicising feminist ideology present in the language, the imagery, the narrative, and the peritextual aspects of the texts, such as the afterword to *Asking For It*, which contains information about rape support services. Elements such as these see the works act more like political manifestos than fiction – especially when read in conjunction with one another. As well as an author, O'Neill is a public figure and one of the most vocal activists for women's rights in Ireland today; she is considerably influential as an author and public activist within mass culture and YA publishing. She has had an active social media presence; she is a weekly columnist for the *Irish Examiner*; and she regularly appears in interviews across various media platforms. Her texts for young adults have received multiple awards (Irish, UK and Ireland, and American) and have been published internationally in YA and adult formats. The rights for *Only Ever Yours*, *Asking For It* and *After the Silence* have also been acquired for adaptation to film and TV. O'Neill presented an RTE documentary about sexual violence in Ireland and *Asking For It*, as already mentioned, was adapted for the stage and produced in Ireland and the UK.

The classification of O'Neill's texts as feminist – through marketing and promotional choices; positioning in bookshops and libraries; the inclusion of author interview and sexual assault helpline numbers in the afterword (*Asking For It*); and O'Neill's non-fiction writing, public appearances, and online presence – serves to deliberately situate them culturally and politically as feminist. Thus, an effort to control how readers absorb texts through their classifications is demonstrated – by manipulating the physical and social environments surrounding her texts, the aim of politicising the reader as a feminist thinker in support of O'Neill's authorial agenda is made plain. All texts work in this way, but mostly not as strongly as O'Neill's do. In light of the popularity of feminist ideology in contemporary

youth publishing, it is important to consider work that is celebrated as feminist with the same level of criticism that accuses "woke" advertising campaigns by commercial corporations of "doing feminism" (the co-option and exploitation of feminism for capitalist gain). In other words, to accept a work as "good" because it is feminist is counterproductive to the ethics of the cause itself and ignorant of the complexity and variety of possible ways in which a text might relate to some aspects of feminism and not others. It is also essential to consider that authors may be "doing feminism", consciously or subconsciously, and that this might result in similar complex misrepresentations or misunderstandings of the ethics behind gender equality.

2. iv. *Social Commentary and Rebirth of the Author in O'Neill's Texts*

The linguistic structure of *Only Ever Yours* immediately sets out the narrative binary between men and women designed to reflect real-world gendered inequality: O'Neill presents women character names in lowercase (freida, isabel), while men characters are capitalised (Darwin, Sigmund). These men character names have obvious intertextual symbolism and call to mind dominant psychological narratives about gendered social order and essentialism. As placing women characters' names in lower case is not what happens in the real world, doing so in the texts calls to mind O'Neill's agenda in a very noticeable way. O'Neill's explicit use of linguistic choices and the device of intertextuality through links to feminist ideology and allusions to feminist authors like bell hooks, intentional or not, indicate O'Neill's notable presence as "author" in her texts.

Considering O'Neill's works in relation to theoretical concepts that explore the dynamic between the reader and the author affirms O'Neill's texts' substantial petition to be interpreted by readers and critics as social criticism and as a call to political debate and social change. The concepts of reader-response and author-reader are thus of relevance to my analysis of O'Neill's texts. Reader-response focuses on meaning being found with the reader.

It suggests that the meaning of a text is not intrinsic: the reader creates meaning in the act of reading. As well as this, recent changes in YA publishing that have developed alongside certain political undercurrents and aspects of popular culture are relevant to my argument about the author's presence in O'Neill's works.

As the YA publishing industry has expanded alongside social media's growing presence in people's lives, YA authors have come to have increased public presence. As a result of recent drives for more diversity in YA fiction, evident in campaigns such as #weneeddiversebooks, cultural authenticity and sensitivity regarding subject matter explored in YA literature have become increasingly scrutinised. Peritextual elements of YA books communicate more information about authors' lives because of the increasing importance placed on author transparency regarding the authenticity of his/her experience with his/her subject matter. For example, Megan Brown finds that YA authors whose works include information containing their personal experiences of disability frame themselves as authentic in their writing, and by positioning themselves in this way, these authors directly communicate and control the ways they want their readers to see them (2020, 140-155).

All of this questions the contemporary relevance of Roland Barthes's theory of the death of the Author. Radically rethought in Barthes's "The Death of the Author" (1967) and Foucault's "What is an Author?" (1970), notions of singularity concerning authorship, meaning, and the construction of the text are deconstructed, while multiplicity of meaning and the role of the reader in its construction is emphasised. Sarah Wilson argues that these changing authorship concepts confronted feminist critics with an "insoluble – and still ongoing – dilemma" (2019, 7/8). While the death of the author may mean "the destruction of patriarchal, exclusionary forces within the canon", Wilson contends that by emphasising anonymity and excluding any talk of authorial identity, it might also "invalidate women and ethnic minority inclusion and representation in the canon" (1/2). The benefits of poststructuralist thought for feminists are that "in eliminating the male author,

women and other repressed literary populations may find a voice, as they are liberated from universalism and ideological essentialism" (Wilson 3).

Today, when discussions about writer identity are to the forefront of debates about diversity and representation in literature and across culture, the author's erasure has become increasingly problematic. The recent re-publication of a collection of works by women under their real names, entitled "Reclaim Her Name," included George Eliot's Middlemarch reissued under the name Mary Ann Evan. The publication raised issues about the re-canonisation of women authors. The project was criticised on Twitter for removing authorial autonomy and accused of "Deadnaming" authors, such as Vernon Lee, by not using the name she used in everyday life, which some critics said had played a significant role in her queer self-fashioning.

Analysing the complexity of the relationship between the concept of the death of the Author and feminism, Wilson refers to the significance of feminist theorist Cheryl Walker's argument in "Feminist Literary Criticism and the Author", which emphasises the need for biography and text to interact, so as to neither reduce writing to the personal nor ignore subjectivity and the influence of the author (Wilson 6). In "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach" (1972), German literary theorist Wolfgang Iser shifts the focus from the author's intention to include the reader's response to the text. Iser writes about the gaps in texts that readers must fill in for themselves and emphasises the author's responsibility in creating that space for the reader to be allowed to use his/her imagination to create his/her interpretation. Iser argues that the more a text "individualises or confirms an expectation it has initially aroused, the more aware we become of its didactic purpose so that at best we can only accept or reject the thesis forced upon us" (283).

In the context of contemporary YA literature, this well-established 20th-century theory takes on new relevance. Authors' social media accounts and presence across a range of digital spaces allow readers and fans to communicate with authors directly and to gain

access to their personal lives – or the sides of their lives that authors curate. In the age of social media, where public displays of ideology are commonplace, it is easy for readers to decide whether they share or are opposed to an author's political/ religious beliefs without reading their texts and, so, they might be likely to avoid or seek out an author's work based on these aspects rather than the work's merit. Furthermore, reader-author interaction outside of the book in this way can mean that YA readers only read texts that will reinforce pre-existing beliefs rather than texts that might present them with challenging or opposing ideologies. Peggy Semingson has written about how "learning about the author can personalise and enhance the reading experience" (2016, 105). Megan Brown argues that authentic and accurate representation of disability in YA literature leads to an avoidance of negative stereotyping (155). While these things may be true, it is also essential to consider how knowing about an author's personality and life experience ahead of reading a text compromise the reading experience. This dissertation argues that O'Neill's works limit the possible roles that readers can assume in responding to the texts by heavily promoting authorial intention and exerting authorial control.

2. v. *Critical Responses to O'Neill's Texts*

O'Neill's *Only Ever Yours* won Newcomer of the Year at the Irish Book Awards, 2014, and the Bookseller YA Prize. *Asking For It* won Book of the Year at the Irish Book Awards and stayed in the Irish Top Ten fiction chart for over a year in 2015 (quercusbooks.co.uk). Her latest novel for adults *After the Silence* won Crime Novel of the Year at the Irish Book Awards, 2020, and by the end of 2020, it had sold 12,406 copies and stood as the thirty-second most bought book of the year. Film and television rights have been optioned for both *Only Ever Yours* and *Asking For It*, and the television rights for *After the Silence* were bought by Tiger Aspect – the production company behind the popular and critically renowned BBC series *Peaky Blinders* in March 2021.

The focus in O'Neill's work on effecting social change has seen it lauded as a long-awaited reformist vein of young adult literature in Ireland and internationally: "O'Neill's book (*Asking For It*), particularly in this country, has sparked a discussion about rape culture and consent that is important, necessary, and long overdue" (Hennessy, "Speaking Up"). Patrick Sproull's review of O'Neill's work in a 2015 piece in *The Guardian* read, "no hyperbole here but Louise O'Neill is the best YA fiction writer alive today. Patrick Ness, Malorie Blackman and John Green are all exceptional authors, producers of the finest YA books in recent years, but none of them match up to Louise O'Neill". Writing for *The New York Times*, Jeff Giles describes *Asking For It* as "riveting and essential. Teenagers will recognise its difficult truth and devour it" ("YA crossover").

The conservative depiction of Ireland as wholly and fundamentally patriarchal in structure has been largely unchallenged. Equally, O'Neill's works have been accepted and celebrated as feminist when, in fact, many facets of her work fall short of upholding feminist values. Few reactions to the works exact criticism. Peter Crawley describes the stage adaptation of *Asking For It* as "unsettling and alarming for good reason" but not "immune to harmful images" precisely that of Emma's "victimhood forever" status (2018). Jennifer Gouck emphasises the significance of *Asking For It*'s deconstructionof the cultural myth that any victim of rape could ever be "asking for it" but, like Crawley, concurs that the work is not immune from the creation or conservation of other harmful myths. "While O'Neill's representations of rape (culture) are vivid and shocking, offering new complexities to the ways in which we can approach both the theorisations of these issues and the culture(s) surrounding them, there are", Gouck remarks, "times where, despite its nuances, her project falls just short of its aims" (2016, 11). These criticisms make up a minor part of the overall response to O'Neill's work. Although Gouck acknowledges that O'Neill's efforts to "illustrate the complexities of men's relationships" (8) with "rape culture" largely fail, her allowance for nuance in O'Neill's treatment of male characters is overly generous,and

Crawley does not extend his criticism to the harmful images in the play adaptation's graphic visual treatment of male characters that depict them as bestial, one-dimensional brutes.

Key to contextualising critical and cultural responses to O'Neill's works like these that omit consideration of the works' conventional, counter-progressive, and problematic aspects, is an examination of the works as intimately connected to the complex sociohistorical context and feminist politics of the era in which they were written – many factors of which have influenced their formation and complicated their reception. Standpoints perceived as feminist in O'Neill's texts and popular culture's use of feminist theory is very often intolerant and falls short of promoting equality. Points of comparison, made later in this chapter, between the evolution of Irish children's and YA literature and in the last decade of the twentieth century into the early twenty-first century, and this recent period of flourishing in the second decade of the twenty- first century, are made to highlight several points of continuity, particularly that of a sustained concern with the dominance of Ireland's past on its present. Contrasts with Irish, specifically, as well as other international young adult literature more broadly, are made to ascertain comparative approaches to dealing with the complexities and challenges involved incultivating a diverse range of previously unheard perspectives and voices in Irish YA literature and with cultural heritages that have historically impeded that development.

Chapter One: Author, Texts and Context

This chapter provides an overview of YA literature's history. Current perceptions of adolescence and its representation in literature are analysed in light of liminality, the impact of popular culture, and a modern-day acceptance that adolescence is an expansive, dynamic state. This chapter describes the evolution of Irish YA literature and discusses how Louise O'Neill and the other Irish authors address contemporary issues in their works of YA fiction. The campaign for social change in Ireland regarding women's rights and gender-based violence, and evident in these authors' works, is considered in relation to social-change oriented international youth literature and culture. This chapter contends that works of literature like O'Neill's with seemingly emancipatory agendas, foremost to do with gender and sexism, do not receive the criticism they should. The mainstreaming of feminism underpinned by the rise of moral outrage as an aspect of contemporary culture, I argue, contribute to readers and critics celebrating literature like O'Neill's as innovatively rethinking gender inequality. This chapter argues that rather than promoting egalitarian relationships and empowering women, O'Neill's works promote gendered conflict and provide distorted constructions of male domination and female subjugation.

Connections and disparities between feminist theory and O'Neill's articulation of feminist issues are investigated. This chapter calls attention to the direct comparisons that can be made between the difficulties that the recent surge in feminist YA literature presents and how certain aspects of contemporary feminist theory are being applied in popular culture. This chapter finds that O'Neill's radical feminist perspective, which sees women's needs as opposed to men's and unites all women as a collective regardless of other variants, such as class or race, could cause political polarisation more than unity.

Young Adult Literature

1. i. *The Characteristics and Liminal Nature of YA Literature*

Still sometimes considered a subgenre of children's literature, critics and readers increasingly locate YA literature as a genre in and of itself. YA fiction is divided into various subgenres, such as fantasy, romance, dystopia, horror, non-fiction and literary fiction. YA literature's increasingly broad range is reflected in its readership, which includes the teens it portrays as well as an often-larger adult following. For a literary genre in existence since the 1960s in the United States (Michael Cart) and the 1990s in Ireland (Frank Fahy, 1996, Pádraic Whyte, 2011), YA literature has seen quite the evolution.

In *Teaching Young Adult Literature* (2020), Mike Cadden, Karen Coats, and Roberta Seelinger Trites discuss YA literature's prominence and popularity and its appeal to teenagers and adults. Cadden, Coats, and Trites cite recent examples of YA novels featuring in US best-seller lists and high percentages of adults buying YA literature for their own consumption as evidence of the YA market's position as a "vibrant and vital sector of the publishing sector", which has "gained an unprecedented readership in recent years" (1). Statistics reported in Bower Market Research's 2012 biannual study of publishing for children evidence an expansion of youth literature readership demographics. The study suggests that fifty-five per cent of buyers of books designated YA are older than eighteen, with the largest cohort aged between thirty and thirty-four (bowker.com). Out of the adults surveyed, seventy-eight per cent said they were purchasing for their own reading.

As the YA genre has expanded, the difficulty of defining what separates a novel for a young teenager, an older teenager, from that for an adult has had implications for how books are categorised and marketed. It has also meant that the terms "young adult", "adolescent" and "teenager" are often used interchangeably in YA literary criticism. Cadden, Coats and

Trites define YA literature as “texts written or produced for adolescents and marketed directly to teens” (3). Their separate definition of “adolescent literature” as a “broader category of literature”, which “includes adolescence as a content topic” but is not necessarily “written for a teen audience” is relevant to my analysis of the complications of categorising O’Neill’s works of youth literature (3).

Michael Cart (2008) describes the term “young adult literature” as “slippery and inherently amorphous, for its constituent parts “young adult” and “literature” are dynamic, changing asculture and society – which provide their context – change” (“The Value”). Certainly, in the West, the conventional definition of the term has significantly expanded. Scientific advancements asserting that puberty begins earlier than twelve or thirteen and that young adults continue to develop for longer physically are partly responsible for increasingly expansive definitions of young adults. The protracted period that many young people remainsingle or supported by parents for is also highly significant; likewise, their now common-place extended education.

Current understandings of adolescence and its representation in literature produced for children and young people is still greatly influenced by Victor Turner’s concept of liminality, developed in the 1960s to analyse rites of passage in tribal sociological systems: the person experiencing the transitional stages between adolescence and adulthood is “betwixt and between” – no longer a child but not yet an adult (95). This liminal period – during which the adolescent experiences a transitional journey between childhood and adulthood and gains an understanding of power, whilst simultaneously experiencing their own disempowerment (Trites, 2019) – has become increasingly protracted. As a result,YA literature holds great appeal for an increased group of people.

This changing nature of readership has led to criticism. In her article, “Against YA: Adults should be embarrassed to read Children’s books”, for Slate in 2014, Ruth Graham

suggests a chasm of difference between the literary quality of YA literature and adult literature. Graham's credentials may not suggest that she is best situated to make such sweeping and reductive comments about an entire literary genre – she is a national correspondent covering religion, faith and values for the *New York Time*s (nytimes.com). Nonetheless, her comments suggest a common misperception about YA literature. Graham describes Veronica Roth's *Divergent* (2011) and Stephenie Meyer's *Twighlight* (2005) as "transparently trashy" and argues that the quality of writing in John Green's *The Fault in our Stars* (2012) does not adequately compare with quality (adult) literary fiction. Although her interpretation of YA fiction may be more characteristic of attitudes in 2014 than today, it suggests a prevailing issue. YA literature is a broad genre of widely ranging literary quality written by increasinglydiverse authorship, and yet readers and critics frequently draw interpretations of all YA literature from a minimal sample of contemporary novels, which are often authored by WhiteAmerican/ Euro-centric authors with considerable commercial influence.

The article's title implies that Graham understands YA literature as no different to children's literature. She insists that the books she read as a teenager are no longer valuable to her as an adult, that she is a "different reader today". Graham refers to a statement that Shailene Woodley – the actor who played the role of teenage protagonist Beatrice Prior in the film adaptation of *Divergent* – made after making the film. The actress said that "last year" when she made the film, she could "still empathise with adolescence" but that, now, as a twenty-two-year-old, she felt more removed from her teenage character because she was "not a young adult anymore", she was a "woman" (qtd. in Hirschberg, 2020). The reference, which Graham uses to strengthen her argument in fact, undermines it. Firstly, Woodley was twenty-one when she felt she could "still empathise with adolescence".

Although Graham mostly lampoons thirty-year-olds for reading YA literature, she

would likely acknowledge that twenty-one does not fall easily within the category of "teenager" or "young adult". Secondly, Woodley's perception of herself as a woman is likely to be more directly linked with her understanding of herself as having gained professional kudos than having moved into an age category that "makes" her an adult. Graham criticises YA endingsas "uniformly satisfying", and argues that the "emotional and moral ambiguity of adult fiction – of the real world – is nowhere evident in YA fiction"(2017). These statements further suggest her misconceptions about the genre of young adult literature and the state of adolescence and its relationship with adulthood.

YA literature's broad appeal is evident in Ireland. The 2017 "Irish Book Market Review" shows J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* to be the top title and the "children's book genre" taking thirty-eight per cent of the overall market share above "all fiction" and "all non-fiction" (publishing.ireland.com). The Harry Potter series is widely recognised as having been read by young adults and adults and children, despite having first been published as children's books and marketed to children. This final instalment to the series that sees its characters become young adults had darker themes – adding to its in-betweenness concerning genres of children's, young adult and adult works of literature. YA literature, both Irish and international, has become increasingly popular and occupies a prominent position in bookshops, libraries, and literary festivals. Irish book shops and libraries have sections for YA literature separate from children's and adult literature. Whereas it used to appear as a section in the editorial space for children's literature, writers now discuss YA literature in full articles in Irish national newspapers. Claire Hennessy's *Irish Times* articles are a notable example. YA author Hennessy interrogates young adult fiction's complexities as a literature genre independent of, but inherently connected with, children's and adult fiction with analytical depth. Hennessy's approach to providing YA book recommendations indicates cultural institutions, like the *Irish Times*, accept YA literature's

cultural and literary status, and suggest the growing importance of YA literature in broader Irish culture.

Irish YA literature is experiencing increased critical as well as market success – nationally and internationally. Although still dominated by American and British YA fiction, Irish bookshops now have more quality Irish YA books that filter youth culture through an Irish viewpoint. In 2020, the Carnegie Medal – widely regarded as the most prestigious prize for books for young readers globally – opened up to Irish-published books for the first time, and Irish author Helena Close's YA novel *The Gone Book* (2020) received a nomination. The nomination – described by publisher Matthew Parkinson-Bennet as a "testament to the authenticity" of the authors "depiction of teenage experience" as well as the excellence of her writing (booksirelandmagazine.com) – validates the literary quality of Irish YA literature and Little Island publishing at an international level. The significance of Close, a full-time author for twenty years, writing a novel for young adults for the first time indicates that authors – as well as readers, scholars and critics – are aware that the perceived artistic value of YA literature is mounting. Two out of three of the author reviewers featured on *The Gone Book*'s cover, Joseph O'Connor and Donal Ryan, are esteemed Irish authors who write for adults. Reviews from authors like O'Connor and Ryan lend Close's YA novel a literary gravitas that implies the work has a seriousness and an artistic quality associated with "Literature". It shows that the boundaries between YA and adult publishing markets are disappearing for authors in the way they have been for YA readers for years.

Nevertheless, recent articles about YA authors making a move into writing for adults, like that in *The Guardian*, in 2019, entitled "All grown up now: the writers blurring lines between teen and adult fiction" suggest that writing for young adults is a gateway process before engaging in the serious process of writing "proper" literature for adults. *The Guardian* article's tagline – "Maturing YA authors move beyond rigid age-group markets" – further

emphasises the reductive notion that writing for young adults somehow relates to an immature state of artistry. In the article, Sarah Hughes quotes Louise O'Neill as saying,

> "I think there's always been a blurring of YA and adult fiction but people weren't as aware of it … Books like *The Outsiders*, *Catcher in the Rye* or Curtis Sittenfeld's *Prep* could just as easily be placed on the YA shelves in bookshops today. When I was writing *Only Ever Yours* I didn't set out to write a book for young adults. I just told a story the way how I felt it needed to be told – that did cause some difficulties because many publishers struggled to see how they would market it. Was it YA? Was it adult fiction?"

O'Neill's positioning as an author of both young adult and adult literature within Irish and international publishing culture indicates YA literature's liminality. The publication of O'Neill's works in adult and YA format suggests YA literature's complexity and expansiveness and its position as a dominant market force with broad appeal for adults and teenagers. O'Neill's recent move into adult publishing highlights the status and nature of YA literature concerning adult literature. Analysis of how YA authors, like O'Neill, are positioned (and position themselves) concerning markets, readers and cultural domains, such as feminist fiction, YA fiction, and adult fiction is central to this dissertation.

1. ii. *A Brief History of Young Adult Literature*

Michael Cart (2011) tracks the emergence of YA literature alongside the rise of youth culture in 1930s and 1940s America. He notes a sea change in attitudes to adolescence after World WarII, which saw teenagers recognised as part of a social demographic distinguishable from children and adults. Librarians and publishers began to take note of the "new but still amorphous group of "older readers" (Cart, *Romance* 17). This resulted in significant developments, including the American Library Association changing the name and content of its annual list of best books from "young readers" (1930) to "Adult Books for Young People" (1948), and publishers remarketing adult novels as series aimed at teenage audiences, thus marking a "subgenre among the earliest young adult books" (Cart 19). Although publishers

and librarians tentatively recognised the market, authors sought to distance themselves from it. The concept of writing *for* teenagers was deemed less serious than writing for adults and therefore, unattractive for writers. Novels widely read by teenagers in the 40s and 50s, and now regarded as part of a canon of YA texts, such as Maureen Daly's *Seventeenth Summer* (1942), JD Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* (1954) were published as adult novels. As Cart points out, authors were eager to distinguish themselves as adult authors: Daly stated she intended that her novel *Seventeenth Summer* be "considered a full adult novel and published and reviewed as such" (L. Berger 1994, 216).

The 1967 publication of SE Hinton's *The Outsiders* was ground-breaking in that it was the first text written and published for young adults and because it featured a complex teenage protagonist dealing with realistic concerns, such as poverty, violence and insecurity. When Hinton began writing the text as a teenager, she wrote it out of frustration that novels aimed at teens did not authentically represent teenage experience. Referring to authors of books for teenagers in 1967 Hinton said, "in the fiction they write, romance is still the most popular theme, with a horse-and-the-girl-who-loved-it coming in a close second" (26). The struggle of the protagonist of *The Outsiders*, Ponyboy, with the tensions and hypocrisies of the perceived differences between the lower-class "Greasers" and the upper-class "Socs", captured an authentic sense of teenage frustration and crisis.

Kimberley Reynolds distinguishes writers, like Hinton – whom she terms "ethically engaged youth writers" – from others, like Scottish author Joan Lingard – whom she terms "specialist YA writers" (2020, 3). According to Reynolds, Hinton recognized a significant gap in the literature available to young adults concerning representation. It seems that it is the political nature of Lingard's work that makes it more specific to young adults for Reynolds. Lingard's Kevin and Sadie series (1970 -1976), Reynolds says, examines "a political moment" and encourages young adults to "have an opinion"; it pushes them to be "better informed beyond fiction" provided for them (3). Reynolds's delineation

between “ethically engaged youth writers” and “specialist YA writers” suggests efforts to empower young readers are central to literature written specifically for young adults.

The metamorphic experience whereby the adolescent strives to understand himself/herself by struggling with adult institutions, described by Trites (2000) and Reynolds (2004, 2007), is evident in many pioneering texts that have been influential to the development of YA literature into a genre in its own right, such as Hinton’s *The Outsiders*, as well as subsequent texts important to the development of YA literature, like Robert Cormier’s *The Chocolate War* (1974) and Judy Blume’s *Forever* (1975).

Blume’s *Forever* applied authentic teenage feelings of frustration to the romance YA novel in more profound terms than those that came before it (Allan, 2018). It appealed to teens because of its frank descriptions of sex and, more importantly, its focus on sexual pleasure rather than the possible dire outcomes and punishments associated with teenage sex (Caldwell, 2009). Blume’s female protagonist’s transformation at a personal level was also a critical component in allowing the intended teen readership to connect and relate with the text. Hinton’s treatment of violence and Blume’s treatment of sexuality made once-taboo topics more acceptable and part of a burgeoning transformation that saw YA literature increasingly tackle weighty cultural issues and complex socio-political concerns in an increasingly realistic manner.

1. iii. *Controversies of YA Literature*

The separation of books for adolescents into “teen” and “young adult” in Irish bookshop Easons, in 2014, indicates an effort to expand the category to include edgier, more “adult” content for those closer to adulthood: “young adults”. Publishers and booksellers seek books with “crossover appeal” and often market YA texts in a manner that demonstrates the texts’ varied appeal and ability to straddle publishing categories. Works such as JK Rowling’s Harry Potter series (1997-2007) and Susan Collins’s The Hunger Games Trilogy (2008-2010)

were critical publications in the development of YA fiction's enlarging draw because of how they transcended genre and demonstrated mass appeal to children, teenagers and adults. In Rowling's series, the characters start as children and grow up with each book. The series provoked debate about how the books could be categorised and who should be reading them. The series' mass appeal for adults showed the distinctions between YA literature and adult literature, and between a young adult and an adult, to be complex.

In an Irish context, this is demonstrated by Edna O'Brien's *Country Girls* – originally written and published for an adult audience in 1960 – appearing in the teenage section of Waterstones in 2015 and by the publication history of O'Neill's texts. O'Neill positions her YA novels as works that she wrote out of interest in the subject matter, rather than as works of fiction specifically for young adults. O'Neill's editor of *Only Ever Yours*, *Asking For It* and *Only Love* Niamh Mulvey – whom she credits with allowing her to take creative risks – describes a YA book with "star appeal" as one "whose protagonists are teenage but whose concerns and appeal are universal" (qtd. in Bannon, 2015). The endings of O'Neill's texts do not traditionally align with the types of endings more commonly considered characteristic of YA literature, which often see protagonists triumph in their negotiation of social power. This is a highly significant factor in why O'Neill's texts are often perceived as being for adults or as having a universal appeal – and why critics often treat them as original and risk-taking.

Some critical responses to O'Neill's works of YA fiction suggest that because they blur the boundaries and conventions of YA literature, they are somehow "pushing boundaries". In fact, many YA authors, like Robert Cormier, did this far earlier than O'Neill. Like *Only Ever Yours*, Cormier's 1974 work, *The Chocolate War,* presents power as a corrupting force and questions social institutions and organisations influence over the individual's agency. Both novels have similarly tragic outcomes for their protagonists in the face of dominant power structures. Cormier's text is regarded as pioneering because of its unsentimental and bleak representation of the power and control exerted by bullying adults

and boys at a Catholic school and its lack of a redeeming resolution for the young reader. According to O'Neill, *Only Ever Yours* was met with trepidation by many publishers who viewed it as too dark, with an ending too bleak, making it difficult to categorise (qtd. in Bannon). O'Neill's attitude to writing a YA novel can be compared with Cormier's: Cormier stated that he wrote *The Chocolate War* "entirely innocent that there were such things as young adult novels. I thought I was just writing a novel"; O'Neill has said, "when I began writing *Only Ever Yours*, I didn't realise I was writing a story for young adults …I just wanted to tell the story in the way that I felt it needed to be told without censoring myself" (qtd. in Bannon). Accounts of O'Neill's perceived originality in the media suggest a flawed conception of young adult literature.

According to *The Times*, "the young-adult genre has struggled to contain the ambition" of O'Neill's work – and with *After the Silence*, the separation is complete" (Keogh 2020). Keogh's comment seriously devalues young adult literature. *After the Silence*, O'Neill's adult novel deals with many of the same themes as her previous works of fiction, focusing on emotional manipulation and domestic abuse. The novel's framing by reviews in the media in this way does not suggest a separation. Instead, it emphasises the relationship between YA and adult literature. The complexities involved in categorising YA literature are to do with how issues of maturation pervade YA literature, and what Roberta Seelinger Trites describes as the "romantic expectations we have of the conventions of young adult literature" (*Disturbing* 15). Trites argues that "adolescent literature is at its heart, a romantic literature because so many of us authors, critics, teachers, teenagers – need to believe in the possibility of teenage growth" (15) and the reason for the controversy that existed around texts like *The Chocolate War* resulted from its failure to meet the "romantic expectations" held by adults regarding the conventions of YA literature (15).

According to Trites, growth is key in the YA novel, as is evident in the optimistic Bildungsroman structure of many YA texts. She contrasts the Bildungsroman with the

Entwicklungsroman, noting that many of the YA novels that emerged in the 1970s, subsequently referred to as "problem novels", were "Entwicklungsroman: the character grows as s/he faces and resolves one specific problem" (14). Increasingly, YA literature scholars and critics find that YA literature's conflation with "coming-of-age" and problems or "issues" oversimplify YA literature. Trites, for example, finds that although "the primary purpose of the adolescent novel may appear to be a depiction of growth", the genre offers far more complexity in what it suggests regarding power and powerlessness (x). Progressively, YA scholars and critics look beyond examinations of "coming-of-age" and "issues" in young adult literature, suggesting a broadened perception of adolescent complexity.

YA literature has a tradition of courting controversy in terms of how it addresses contemporary issues, but especially in more recent years in relation to the prevalence of depressing themes and dark endings in many YA texts. In "My 'Reprehensible' Take on Teen Literature" (2011), Meghan Cox Gurdon – children's books reviewer for *The Wall Street Journal* – argues that explicit abuse, violence and depravity in YA literature has developed as an uncriticised phenomenon, irrespective of ethical consideration. This, she contends, has effected feelings of disquiet in many adults – specifically parents and guardians – about the kinds of language and content in contemporary YA.

Historically, the enterprise of writing for the young was associated with the notion that it ought to be educational and mindful of moral consequence. Notions of watchfulness and caution, substantial components in contemporary debate about literature for young people, have persisted since John Newbery's *A Pretty Little Pocket-Book* was published in 1744, inscribed with the motto "Delectando monemus" (instruction with delight). Anxiety on the part of adults about how to balance "delight" – joy, ease, and pleasure – with "instruction" – moral lesson – remains central to ongoing deliberations in children's literature. Gurdon maintains she does not advocate banning or censorship but insists that "it is surely worth our taking into account whether we do young people a disservice by seeming to

endorse the worst that life has to offer". Gurdon's addressal of the need for "taking care" in YA literature suggests the persistent connection between literature for children and literature for young adults, as well as the complex role of adults in both fields concerning the imbalance of power between the adult author and their intended child or young adult reader.

Aspects of Gurdon's argument – chiefly the condescension intrinsic to the connotation that "books focusing on pathology help to normalise them, and in the case of self-harm may even spread their plausibility and likelihood to young people who might otherwise never have imagined such extreme measures" – are problematic. Her argument is not so lacking in nuance as to discount adolescent suffering and experience or suggest that a child who reads about murder will become a murderer. It is, she maintains, "an argument for taking care". Nevertheless, her suggestion that the main function of writing for the young is to be didactic is relevant to the problematic nature of O'Neill's writing – the purpose of which appears to be moral didacticism.

At the Irish *Mountains to Sea* festival in 2014, the "Going Too Far?" YA discussion panel comprised of critics, editors, buyers and authors – including Louise O'Neill – and debated "unhappy endings" and mounting "edgier content" in Irish and international YA. O'Neill described having been asked by several editors to change the ending of *Only Ever Yours* and to make her protagonist, freida, more "spunky" (qtd. in Hennessy, "Books"). The idea that an "unhappy ending" in YA is problematic relates to the notion that dark subject matter ought to have a cathartic effect on the reader, and that one of the main functions of YA is to impart a sense of hope, rather than hopelessness, about the difficulties involved in burgeoning adulthood to a coming-of-age reader. O'Neill's *Only Ever Yours* and *Asking For It* both feature purposeful "unhappy endings". Although O'Neill altered sections of *Only Ever Yours*, which were apparently "too graphic", so as to align them with her editor's wishes, she refused to change the ending as, she contended, a more hopeful ending would not have been in line with the abusive world of the text (qtd. in Hennessy, 2016). She made the point that

"teens often do view the world as a dark place, and rightfully so – they see what's actually going on in the world". Later chapters question whether O'Neill's depiction of worlds (dystopian and real) with little or no hope retain revolutionary power by influencing the reader's interpretation of their present reality and imploring them to react and improve it.

1. iv. *Theorizing YA Literature*

In his introduction to *The Critical Merits of YA Literature: Coming of Age* (2014) Crag Hill argues that YA literature has "come-of-age" – that is, it has established its value within the literary tradition and its legitimacy as an area of scholarship. Hill acknowledges others who have made this argument before him (Monseau and Salvner 1992 xi; Soter and Connors 2009, 62), as well as those who have emphasised YA literature's literary standing (Gallo 2005, 27); how it holds up to contemporary literary theory (Moore 1997); and its maturity (Wilder and Teasley 1998, 42; 2000, 55). Leah Philips maintains that while a preoccupation with defining YA literature as a field of study prevails, there is no longer the lack of theoretically oriented YA criticism of the kind that the 1995 Children's Literature Association (ChLA) conference found. Philips notes that since ChLA Quarterly's 1996 "Special Issue: Critical Theory and Adolescent Literature", there have been several book-length works published on YA and references the following: Trites's *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (2000); Alison Waller's *Constructing Adolescence in Fantastic Realism* (2011); Victoria Flanagan's *Technology and Identity in Young Adult Fiction* (2014); Megan Musgrave's *Digital Citizenship in 21st Century Young Adult Literature* (2016) and others. This recent scholarship builds on other scholars' work which additionally defined YA. This includes Maria Nikolajeva's *From Mythic to Linear* (2000) in which she argues that "neither category – children's or adult's fiction – is a homogenous group of texts" (3) and Antero Garcia's *Critical Foundations in YA Literature* (2013). Garcia's text offers a theory-based approach to facilitating young people's

critical engagement with YA literature, which Cadden, Coats and Trites build on in their most recent edited collection, *Teaching Young Adult Literature* (2020). Growing critical deference to YA literature as a genre of literary value and as a field of study that can be individually defined is progressively more evident in recent years.

In the years following those publications listed by Philips, more scholarly works have been published, including Melanie Ramdarshan Bold's *Inclusive Young Adult Fiction: Authors of Colour in the United Kingdom* (2019) and Philips's forthcoming *Female Heroes in Young Adult Fantasy Fiction*. In her conference report for the Identities in YA conference – solely dedicated to YA fiction and held at the University of Northampton in 2018 – Philips argues that the conference marked a critical turning point for YA literary studies by recognising and engaging with it as a field of study independent of children's literature. Although, according to Philips, YA literature is still "overwhelmingly conflated with children's literature" and consequently "lacks a place in the academy", a "robust critical theory of YA is forming" (Identities 1/5). Following this conference, Philips and Emily Corbett facilitated a round-table discussion, entitled "Ploughing the Field: A Discussion about YA Studies" with sixteen contributors working in YA Studies in 2020. Panellists discussed YA literature as both a commercial success and an ideologically complex field of study, and considered its significance in the contemporary cultural landscape and academic discourse. The existence of such a round table and its publication in the dedicated YA journal – the *International Journal of Young Adult Literature* (IJYAL) – suggests YA literature's growing independence as an academic discipline. Also in 2020, YASA (The YA Studies Association) – an international organisation "existing to increase the knowledge of, and research on, YA literature, media, and related fields" headed by Philips – hosted their first biennial conference on the theme of YA Studies Around the World.

As well as more associations dedicated to YA studies, university conferences and symposiums devoted to disseminating YA research are on the increase, demonstrating

growing interest in, and recognition of, the field of YA Studies. In Ireland, YA literature is now included in Dublin City University's Masters of the Arts in Children's and Young Adult Literature postgraduate degree course (formerly a Masters of the Arts in Children's Literature). This suggests YA literature's increased critical status, and marks a significant departure for the study of the discipline in Ireland.

Irish YA Literature

2. i. *YA Literature and Research in the Late-Twentieth and Early Twenty-First Centuries*

> "The history and politics of Ireland have been such that nothing prefixed by the word "Irish" allows for easy definition: this consideration applies to "Irish Children's literature" as much as to other things" (Dunbar 1997, 309).
>
> "Along with the complications there will also be opportunities … Irish writing is still young"
>
> **(**Coghlan 2009, 101)

The particulars of Irish history and culture are of central concern to academic discourse regarding the state of Irish children's and young adult literature in the late twentieth and early twenty-first-centuries. Writing more than a decade after Robert Dunbar's above-quoted statement in 1997, Pádraic Whyte maintained in 2011 that "the link between past and present" remained a "dominant concern in much contemporary Irish writing and in Irish culture in general" ("Irish Childhoods" xii). Whyte's *Irish Childhoods: Children's Fiction and Irish History* sought to redress the imbalance that up to that time saw few critics explore in detail the position of children's fiction within such discourses. Dunbar and Whyte are among many Irish academics in the field of children's literature to explore the influence of the past on contemporary Irish writing for children and young adults. Works by other scholars include but are not limited to Celia Keenan's "Divisions in the World of Publishing for Children: Re-Colonization or Globalization?" (2007), Emer O'Sullivan's *Comparative Children's Literature* (2009), Valerie Coghlan's "Question of identity and otherness in Irish writing for young people" (2009) and "What Foot Does He Dig With? Inscriptions of

Religious and Cultural Identity" (2011), and Patricia Kennon's "Reflecting Realities in Twenty-First Century Irish Children's and Young Adult Literature" (2020). These scholars outline a number of factors that are significant to the definition and categorisation of a canon of Irish children's literature. They consider the complexity of "Irishness" and emphasise Ireland's colonial and religious heritage in relation to issues that include identity and literary categorisation. Furthermore, they highlight the gap between social change in Ireland and its representation in children's literature (Dunbar "Rarely Pure", 317; Coghlan, "Questions", 101; Whyte "Young Adult", 71).

Two points of emphasis emerge from these associations. Firstly, despite having become a more significant part of the Irish literary scene in the 1980s – during a time in Ireland when religious laws to do with personal morality were gradually rescinded followed by a period of flourishing towards the end of the 20th century lasting approximately ten years – Irish children's literature in 2011 remained "overall, conservative" (Coghlan, "What Foot" 58). Secondly, young adult literature – as a subsection of children's literature – is highlighted as having experienced the most notable delay in the development of a tradition of writing reflecting the realities of contemporary Ireland (Dunbar "Rarely Pure", 317; Coghlan, "Questions", 92; Whyte "Young Adult", 80).

The end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries saw developments in Irish society that "dramatically transformed the economic, political, and cultural landscape of the nation" (Whyte, *Irish Childhoods* xi). Ireland's surge in economic growth led to a rise in the number of Irish publishers publishing literature for children and young adults, as well as to changing attitudes to children and childhood, aided by developments, such as the Irish Arts Council extending its literature policy to children's fiction in 1981 (Dunbar 169) and The Ark – a cultural centre for children – opening in 1995. Of further significance were developments in Irish culture in relation to how children are perceived and treated, such as the appointment of a minister for child and youth affairs in

2005, and others related to a changing perception of child protection, including the historic enquiries into child abuse, the Ryan Report, 2009, and the Murphy Report, 2009 (Whyte, *Irish Childhoods* xi). These developments played a vital role in the expansion and appreciation of children's literature during this era, as did an increase in research.

Nonetheless, despite the 1990s being an era of progress – or at least productivity – in Irish writing and publishing for young people, described as an "astounding flourishing" (O'Sullivan 185), a "mini-boom" (Coghlan, "Questions" 91), and a "renaissance in Irish writing for children" (Whyte, *Irish Childhoods* xi), the fact remains that by 2009 there was "little writing for a young adult audience", "a paucity of picturebooks and quality fiction for all ages" and the situation was such that, according to Valerie Coghlan, "no matter how it is defined, "Irish Children's literature" still tends to shy away from anything radical in theme, style or ideology" ("Questions"101). Coghlan deems the period of progress to have lasted approximately ten years after which, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, there was a decline in publications designed for a young audience. Even with developments in Irish publishing for a youth market in the 1990s, the majority of quality Irish writing was being published outside of Ireland: "books by Irish authors and illustrators published outside of Ireland" were "predominant, numerically and creatively" (Coghlan, "Questions" 92).

Ireland's cultural heritage shaped by religion has had a significant bearing on the representation of and access to certain content in Irish children's literature. Valerie Coghlan remarks "Ireland's geographical position between Britain and the United States both physically and psychologically affects Irish publishing for young people" ("Questions" 93). This has meant Ireland is simultaneously isolated from and largely influenced by British and American popular cultures and traditions of writing for children and young people. Additionally, Irish writing has been subject to foreign expectations and susceptible to the draw of adaptation to achieve publishing abroad and reach wider audiences. In 1946, Kenneth

Reddin asked "what is the matter with Irish writers of children's stories? They are completely stage Irish" (75). Reddin's statement illustrates the lengthy history of foreign influence over how the Irish have been portrayed in literature.

At the beginning of the 2010s, issues of censorship and the lack of publication opportunities for writers and illustrators in Ireland, as well as the globalization of the book industry, continued to result in many Irish authors publishing abroad. Writing in 2011, Sandra L. Beckett notes how "for the most part, the work of Ireland's foremost contemporary picturebook artists (Marie-Louise Fitzpatrick, PJ Lynch, Niamh Sharkey, and Oliver Jeffers) are published outside of Ireland. Even among those published in Ireland, few have any perceptible Irish content, with the exception of Irish myths, legends, and folktales" (169). Beckett's contention that this "may be a result of the desire to appeal to international audiences" demonstrates the abiding relevance of the pressures brought about by globalization for contemporary Irish writers and illustrators (169). In 2007, Celia Keenan expressed concern that the homogenizing impulse for the "local to cede to the global" might mean the "globalising trend was likely to continue or even intensify" ("Divisions" 202) in Irish writing for the young. Coghlan, comparatively, writing two years later, suggests that Irish children's literature of the time was "achieving a new degree of maturity" meaning it could "be 'of Ireland' while not necessarily preoccupied with a traditional Ireland" ("Questions" 101).

The measure of outside influence on Irish writing is mainly recognised as having been more to do with globalization rather than with historical colonisation or any contemporary recolonization of Irish children's literature. International influence is appreciated for diversifying – and complicating – the categories of "Irish writer" and "Irish writing" as definitions of Irish identity have broadened (Dunbar "Rarely Pure"; Coghlan and O'Sullivan, *Irish Children's Literature*). In the introduction to their volume, *Irish Children's Literature*

and Culture: New Perspectives on Contemporary Writing, editors Valerie Coghlan and Keith O'Sullivan remark that many contributors to the volume identify globalization as "one of the most significant contextualizing influences on children's literature" in their period of focus: 1980 to 2010 (2). In the following decade, when O'Neill's texts were written and first published (in England) and in which they have continued to be adapted and received by an international audience, globalization has made Irish children's literature increasingly the "literature of a more universal reader" (Coghlan and O'Sullivan, 3).

Whyte's concern that hesitancy on the part of Irish writers and publishers to engage frankly with topics of sex and sexuality in the late 1990s and early 2000s, combined with a decrease in the number of commissioners of children's literature in Ireland, led him to believe that the "future of Irish fiction does not look good" ("Young Adult Fiction" 80). He did, however, note "despite such trends and limitations, it was evident that in the last two decades several Irish authors … [had] engaged with youth culture and created novels that bring the often-marginalised and controversial experiences into the mainstream" ("Young Adult Fiction" 80). Agreeing with Whyte's summation of the state of Irish young adult literature of the 1990s and early 2000s, Patricia Kennon additionally emphasises the notable absence of representation of issues that are especially pertinent to women and girls. She states "Irish youth literature was slow to recognise or address subjects such as teenage pregnancy, the realities of female embodiment, reproductive freedoms, and institutional child abuse in past and contemporary Irish society", and argues that contemporary Irish women creators of young adult literature – including Louise O'Neill – have been committed to counteracting this ("Reflecting" 134).

2. ii. *The "Rise of Irish Young Adult Literature" in the Second Decade of the Twenty-FirstCentury*

> "Within an Irish context there is no established tradition of publishing for young adults"
> (Whyte, "Young Adult", 71)

> "Current Irish YA has its own distinctive voice … one that is often lyrical but also politically charged"
>
> (Hennessy, "YA Fiction", 2019)

Considering the progression of American YA literature, Michael Cart (2011) emphasises the onerousnature of defining and chronicling YA literature in any context due to the amorphous nature of the term "young adult" itself; scholars dealing with the specifics of identifying and classifying Irish YA literature consistently call attention to the challenges of defining "Irishness". The evolving nature of what it is to be a young adult, distinctively an Irish young adult, is significant to the question of origin and definition of Irish YA literature. Of further bearing, is the Irish State's history, in its immediate past, of viewing the guardianship of its citizens morals as part of its core duties. Central to this concept has been the persuasive sway of the Catholic hierarchy – this has had implications for Irish children's literature, and a particularly marked impact on Irish writing for young adults, that sets this writing apart from American and British traditions.

In the 4th century B.C. Plato is reported to have asked, "what is happening to our young people? they disrespect their elders, they disobey their parents. They ignore the law. They riot in the streets, inflamed with wild notions. Their morals are decaying. What is to become of them?" Plato's statement reveals the long historically and culturally nurtured tradition of adult efforts to control young people's morals that may stem from a fear of their potential and eventual ascendency to power. The dominant understanding that the period of growth between childhood and adulthood is crucially important to adult identity and citizenship plays an important role in the conceptualisation and treatment of adolescents. The scope of this dissertation does not allow for an in-depth discussion on this and it has been covered in great detail in many other texts including, most notably, Greg Hamilton's "Mapping A History of Adolescence and Literature for Adolescents" (2000) and Steven

Mintz's *Huck's Raft*: *a history of American childhood* (2004). Reflecting on adolescence as a dynamic and seemingly naturally rebellious state, Lee A. Talley remarks, "given the considerable changes in mind and body that mark adolescence, and our belief in the liminal state between childhood and adulthood, it is no wonder that YA literature is viewed – positively or negatively – as potent and transformative" (2011, 232). The drive togain authority and personal freedom intrinsic to adolescence sets YA literature apart as a revolutionary space and presents a dilemma for those in control: adults.

The longstanding perception of adolescents as especially volatile and vulnerable to moral corruption goes some way to explaining the particular level of constraint and lack of development evident in Irish writing for young adults that has been identified within the broader context of Irish children's literature. Nonetheless, it does not fully explain why it has particularly suffered, especially when compared with writing for young adults in the American and European, chiefly British, tradition – both of which began exploring controversial themes relevant to the lives of young adults, such as sex, sexuality, gender equality, drug and alcohol abuse, class, and racism much earlier than Irish YA. Whyte largely attributes the lack, so late into the twenty-first century, of quality Irish YA fiction engaging with the intricacies of youth culture (including the above-mentioned issues) to economic concerns, a limited children's publishing industry and, more significantly, to the main reason – "the lingering influence of the Catholic Church, and conservative ideologies in Irish society" ("Young Adult" 71).

Whyte's statement came ten years after Michael Cart said, in 2001, that American YA was experiencing a *new* golden age – the first having begun with Robert Cormier in the 60s. The existence and evolution of a tradition of writing for young adults in Ireland stands in sharp contrast to the US, where, since the mid-90s, Cart maintains, the body of literature published for young adults has increasingly celebrated "artistic innovation, experimentation and risk-taking" ("The Value" 2008). Emer O' Sullivan's report, that the wave of "New

Realism" exploring previously "excluded topics" evident in European and American writing for young adults in the 1970s did not reach Ireland, emphasises the particular complexity of Ireland's position (6/7). Although many Irish teenagers were likely to have experienced some of the concerns to do with sexuality, drugs and alcohol, and family breakdown explored in "New Realism" they would not have read about them in works written by Irish authors for young people, nor were they likely to have had access to those by European and American authors because, as noted by Coghlan, books like these were "rarely stocked in school and public libraries, and many parents would have considered them unsuitable for their young families ("Questions" 101). Robert Dunbar described the "embryo[nic] state" of Irish YA in the late 90s as having rapidly grown and said that ever more increasingly "the contemporary Ireland in which our young actually live assumes a key role in the narratives" (50).

The second decade of the twenty-first century saw subsequent momentous cultural change, which helped further progress in Irish YA fiction. The Arts Council initiative Laureate na nÓg has played a vital role in the ongoing recognition of the role and importance of literature for children in Ireland. The project began in 2010 and has so far chosen six laureates on the basis of "their internationally recognised body of high-quality children's writing or illustration and the considerably positive impact they have had on readers as well as other writers and illustrators" (childrenslaureate.ie). The international recognition, reach, and appeal of works afforded to past Laureates Siobhán Parkinson, Niamh Sharkey, Eoin Colfer, PJ Lynch and Sarah Crossan, and current Laureate Áine Ní Ghlinn, is evidence of further advancements in the recognition nationally of Irish children's literature.

The number of publishers committed to commissioning works for children and young adults has grown. Today these include O'Brien Press, Little Island Books, Futafata, Poolbeg Books, Gill Books, Mercier and tSnáthaid Mhór. Writing in 2017 for Children's Books Ireland, Lisa Redmond notes, "while a lot of the influential and best-selling YA books are

coming from the United States, Ireland is holding its own with some fantastic authors topping the charts and winning prizes on a regular basis" ("The Irish Women"). Redmond attributes this success to O'Neill and other Irish women YA authors who are similarly "unafraid to tackle the big issues" ("The Irish"). A growing range of YA texts – overwhelmingly, but not exclusively, authored by women, including Louise O'Neill, the earlier mentioned Deirdre Sullivan, Sarah Maria Griffin, Moïra Fowley Doyle, as well as Claire Hennessy and Meg Grehan, and also Sarah Crossan and Ceathan Leahy – are committed to tackling issues contentious to Ireland's past and present and dealing with topics that are meaningful to the lived experiences of Irish teenagers today.

Hennessy, Grehan, Crossan, and Leahy have less direct concern with Ireland's history than Sullivan, Griffin and Fowley-Doyle; however, their works do explore issues contentious to Ireland's present, such as abortion (Hennessy), sexual orientation (Greehan), multiculturalism, grief, trauma, neglect and abuse (Crossan), and depression and suicide in adolescent Irish men (Leahy). Published in 2017, Hennessy's *Like Other Girls,* examines the practical challenges and stigma facing Irish teenage girls experiencing an unwanted pregnancy before abortion was made legal. Greehan's verse novel *The Deepest Breath*, published in 2020, is about an eleven-year-old girl's emerging sexual identity as she starts to realise she is attracted to girls. Crossan's work, out of all these, is more universal in its treatment of identity and place. Her verse novels feature a variety of settings and characters with more diverse cultural backgrounds. Crossan's *The Weight of Water* (2012) is about a Polish teenager's experience of coming to England as a refugee, and *One* (2017) set in the US, is about conjoined twins. Each of these writers contribute to presenting Irish identity in diverse ways.

Sullivan, Griffin and Fowley-Doyle have established themselves as YA authors who explore how women – particularly queer women and women who became pregnant outside of

traditional circumstances – have been particularly affected by the Catholic tradition. Patricia Kennon states, the "devoted, explicit sense of Irishness" in the works of Sullivan, Griffin and Fowley Doyle (O'Neill is included but ancillary), defy the homogenizing impulse that Celia Keenan wrote about in 2007, making their works a key part of the continued development of a literature "of Ireland" that engages with Irish history and culture with an increasing frankness and maturity ("Reflecting Realities" 136). Sullivan's *Perfectly Preventable Deaths*, Griffin's *Other Words For Smoke*, and Fowley-Doyle's *All The Bad Apples* – all published in 2019 – reveal an abiding and permanent attachment with Ireland's past in contemporary Irish YA fiction. Their works "excavate the haunting of Ireland's past and present by institutional misogyny, the denial of female bodily autonomy and reproductive rights, the Irish state's complicity with the Catholic church, and the macabre history of mother-and-baby homes" (Kennon, "Reflecting" 137).

2. iii. *The Power of the Past on Irish Young Adult Literature*

> "Ireland bears many scars inflicted upon it by the Church. From the Mother and Baby homes to the Magdalene Laundries, to anecdotal stories about women who were threatened with excommunication if they used contraception and later died in childbirth, to the stomach-turning, heart-breaking accounts of sexual abuse that began to emerge. So, many stories, and the only commonality was the criminal way the Church covered each of them up, protecting the institution rather than the vulnerable"
> (O'Neill, "It's funny")

The notion of the past dominating Irish children's literature, past and present, is repeatedly settled on by academics. This is unsurprising as the past is a fundamental force in all art, including adult fiction. In 2011, Whyte considered the connection between YA fiction and progression in Irish youth culture as directly thwarted by Ireland's history of religious oppression. Preceding Whyte, Celia Keenan and Robert Dunbar have separately noted the significance of history to Irish fiction for children and young adults. Keenan, writing in 1997, stated "in my reckoning, approximately one quarter of all Irish books for children consist of

those of predominantly historical interest" ("Reflecting" 369). Considering this, Keenan notes how fiction for children is "not isolated from other forms of cultural activity" and that "there is in the wider culture of Ireland a very high interest in history" (369). As well as noting the prevalence of interest in historical content in Irish culture, Keenan identifies the benefit that historical distance affords writers, enabling them to "deal with delicate or controversial subjects in a safer context than the utterly contemporary would" (369).

The perception that historical distance is of particular appeal, and, moreover, necessity to the Irish author writing for a young audience, was advanced by Valerie Coghlan in 2011 in her analysis of Siobhan Dowd's novel *A Swift Pure Cry* – set in 1980s Ireland and published in 2006 in Britain. Dowd's novel dealing with small-town depravation, sin, and alleged incest was inspired by true events in Irish history concerning two teenage mothers in 1984. One of which, "the Kerry babies" case, was re-opened by Gardai in 2018. It, and Dowd's posthumous novel *Bog Child* (2008), are regarded by many scholars and critics of Irish youth literature as rare and exceptional for their time because of how they confront difficult topics in Irish history.

In *A Swift Pure Cry* fifteen-year-old protagonist Shell's mother dies, and her father descends into mourning and alcoholism. Shell is left to look after her younger brother and sister and fears her father's sexual advances. When Shell becomes pregnant, she conceals the pregnancy from her father – whom the local priest assumes is the baby's father – and gives birth to a still-born baby. The local community become suspicious that Shell has abandoned the baby and that the local priest is the baby's father when the body of a baby is found. The abandoned baby is Bridie's – Shell's friend – who also became pregnant by teenager Declan, who left both her and Shell for America.

Coghlan argues that Dowd's novel is remarkable, not because of its portrayal of teenage pregnancy, but because it is one of the "few books for young people" in the twenty-

first-century that "addresses, and critiques, the role of religion in Irish life" ("Which Foot", 55). The gap of almost two decades between Dowd's setting for her novel and its publication is noteworthy. It would have been "unthinkable" in 1980's Ireland, Coghlan argues, for Dowd to have used the tragedies upon which the text is based as material for a book for young readers (55). Despite Keenan's conviction in 2007 that more Irish writing for children being published in Ireland (as opposed to in Britain) was a "crucial development in liberating writers from the colonial center" (370), sceptical reserve about the extent of that liberation is expressed four years later by Coghlan. Whether *A Swift Pure Cry* would have been published in the 80s, even in Britain, was, she thought, "debatable" (55). This is testament to the progressive nature of Dowd's text. Pádraic Whyte's observation of Dowd's handling of religion is also of principal relevance to the novel's standing as pioneering in the field of Irish YA fiction. He remarks, "Dowd suggests that it is not simply the church that has failed the teenager, but it is Irish society in general" ("Young Adult" 79). *A Swift Pure Cry* indicates that the role of religion in Irish life has remained a significant influential factor in the lives of Irish people across a broad time period in Irish history, spanning from the texts setting, in 1984, to its publication, in 2006, to the re-opening of one of the cases upon which the narrative was built, in 2018. Dowd's works emphasise the particular weight of impact that religion has had on the lives of Irish children, women and adolescent girls.

Until recently, Irish YA novels have been perceived as not addressing social-justice issues, such as sexism or gender-based violence with the same level of political awareness that is now common. However, in Dowd's novel, gender and sex are cleverly presented in terms of the Virgin Mary/Mary Magdalene dichotomy within protagonist Shell, and serve as an examination of the consequential sexual guilt and hypocritical imbalances in some attitudes to bodily autonomy, sex and sexuality in Irish society. Because the content of O'Neill's *Asking For It* has transparent parallels with a particular case of sexual abuse and rape in Northern Ireland, the novel is often praised as prescient or forewarning of momentous

Irish controversies. Dowd's novel demonstrates contemporaneity with the time of its publication and arguably more prescience than O'Neill's novel because of its parallels with the "Kerry Babies" case and the "Tuam Babies" case, which recently brought the treatment of unmarried mothers and their children in Ireland's past into national debate and public discourse. The case, which came to light in 2018, saw a major forensic investigation into a mass grave at a former Catholic Mother and Baby home exhumed, finding the remains of hundreds of children. There is a conception that Irish YA is only now examining controversial issues pertinent to Irish young adults' lives, particularly young women, when Dowd was already doing so in the late 90s and early 2000s. Perhaps this is because, today, a body of feminist YA literature, which explores the relationship between Ireland's tradition of religious suffocations and the progress of recent decades, exists in the works of O'Neill, Sullivan, Griffin and Fowley-Doyle.

Although the rapid development in Irish YA literature is, according to some, revelatory and overdue, particularly in relation to the attention given to the exploration of gender in the works (Hennessy "There was no YA"; Kennon "Reflecting"), others argue that women's voices have not been quite so underrepresented as the momentum in recent years to uncover and celebrate them has disclosed. A 2018 Children's Books Ireland *Bold Girls* initiative saw many emerging and established works of YA and children's literature celebrated for making an "exceptional contribution to the canon of Irish children's literature" regarding their relationship to a continuing fight in Ireland "for women's human rights, for equal representation across the political landscape, equal pay and equal employment opportunities" (Carroll qtd. in Keating, 2018). Jane Suzanne Carroll argues, "the new feminist movement in children's publishing is not that new. From the very beginning in Ireland you can find women writing about the problems that girls are facing, about bold girls who don't conform but make brave decisions about who they would like to be" (qtd. in Keating). Siobhán Parkinson situates the momentum for explicitly feminist, social-change-

oriented Irish children's literature in recent years within an "international movement", indicating, like Carroll, that part of what has changed is the attitude and appetite for such texts (qtd. in Keating). Parkinson does note that, although there were many depictions of "strong female characters she admired" in the texts she read as a child growing up in Ireland in the 1950s, the same was not available to her as a young adult: "the models put up for young women were primarily about being well behaved … you were meant to value yourself, but only within certain social restraints" (qtd. in Keating). Furthermore, Parkinson's remark advances the case for young adult literature as having stoodout within the tradition of Irish children's literature as particularly limited and regulated.

International YA Literature

3. i. *The Growing Trend for Social-Change-Oriented Children's and YA Literature*

In the 2010s, a high volume of youth literature contained social-change-oriented ideologies operating overtly, often as the text's primary content, suggesting children's and YA literature's role as tools of response to injustices in the political landscape. Feminist thought became particularly evident. Some works, such as Loryn Brantz's 2017 board book, *Feminist Baby*, adapted from her comic strip – a book "for babies" full of jokes about "woke" culture – raise the question of whom these books are written for and marketed to. The term "woke", according to the Merriam-Webster's dictionary definition in 2020, means to be "aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social injustice)". The refrain of Innosanto Negara's *A is for Activism* that reads "pro-pro-protest!/Pea-pea-peace march/ Pow-pow-power/ to the pee-pee-PEOPLE! Ya!" is now undoubtedly even more relevant to the current desperate state of race relations in the United States of America than at the time of its publication in 2012. The text's exterior makes it look like a picturebook for teaching the alphabet. Closer inspection reveals its primary concern is to expound the necessity of teaching children from a very young age about being part of an

activist community. Like O'Neill's texts, it is imbued with a polemical attentiveness to inequality that situates the YA text as a site of resistance, as a sort of political manifesto.

3. ii. *The Role of Irish YA in Addressing Contemporary Issues*

While Irish YA literature's engagement with contemporary matters has marked a significant development in Irish young adult literature, these developments are not without limitation. While often assumed to be progressive, I contend that the genuinely progressive nature of Irish feminist fiction, like O'Neill's young adult texts, can be challenging to evaluate. Within the context of "Me Too", objections to certain aspects of feminist literature could be deemed complicit with the matters in question. The years immediately following thepublication of O'Neill's *Only Ever Yours* and *Asking For It* could be described as banner years for feminism in YA literature. In a similar way to broader literature, the arts, and popular culture, youth literature embraced the new wave of feminism integrated with the "MeToo" era. O'Neill's texts, in which depictions of male faults are sweeping condemnations rather than considered examinations of individuals within a system that, to varying degrees, are biased towards them, offer an overly simplistic response to a very complex topic.

Nevertheless, they are overwhelmingly more celebrated than criticised. This dissertation argues that these accounts result from perceptions of O'Neill's books that view them as giving voice to a perspective (voices) that has been silenced or suppressed in Irish culture. Readers and critics should recognise the surge of feminist ideology in young adult literature as subject to some of the same complications as feminism's commercialisation in recent years, whereby modern marketing utilises social consciousness as a tool for capitalist gain. Like the popularisation of so-called feminist merchandise that works to depoliticise the work of feminist activism by replacing it with empty slogans, or worse, by playing into larger systems of oppression by exploiting workforces, readers and critics ought to interrogate the legitimate nature of O'Neill's expression of feminism.

Only Ever Yours and *Asking For It* were published before liberal, politically correct, or "woke" (alert to racial or social discrimination or injustice) discourses had fully begun to saturate Western popular culture and media in the way that they have today. Political ideologies have become more topicalized than implicit across culture as well as in literature. This is evidenced in contemporary popular culture by the rise of "outrage"/ "cancel" culture. It describes the boycotting or shunning of perceived offensive, questionable or unpopular opinions on social media. There has been a surge in representation of politically incorrect comedy or dialogue on certain media platforms. For example, "Politically Incorrect" is a search title on the media platforms Netflix and Twitter. Growing unease around the puritanical nature of "outrage"/ "cancel" culture, as an extreme facet of social reforms, provides a cultural context through which to critically examine both progressive and regressive ideologies in O'Neill's works in this dissertation.

In certain aspects of contemporary culture, such as "cancel culture", condemnation and excommunication prevail to the point where an authenticity of perspective is often only afforded to an author who writes from the viewpoint of their own culture, ethnicity or sexuality – or even, especially in relation to narratives about sexual assault or rape, from their own personal experience. However, bias and subjective baggage ought to be considered when evaluating feminist fiction in the same way that it is considered in relation to authors who write outside of their own experiences. When a cultural product, such as a novel or a film, is considered reformist for its time, its hidden ideology can go uncritiqued. Unnoticed ideology is often criticised in retrospect, as it is recognised that "how it was" (as depicted in the text or TV show) is not how it is commonly held that it "should" be today. This was demonstrated by the reaction to *Friends* – the most beloved TV show of the 90s in the US and worldwide – when the platform Netflix appropriated the rights to rerun the entire series in 2018. The show was criticised across many left-wing, liberal media platforms as sexist, racist, homophobic, and for body shaming.

Roberta Seelinger Trites states "books for adolescents are subversive – but sometimes only superficially so. In fact, they are often quite didactic" (2019, 1). Texts with radical content might be presumed ideologically subversive or progressive and their – often traditional – ideology masked or overshadowed. Consider Nick McDonnell's young adult novel *Twelve* (2003). Its subject matter (hedonism, drugs, violence, and sex) meant it was considered subversive and radical. However, the ideology it portends is quite traditional. It does not explore the characters' lifestyles as revolutionary or transcendent. The effects of parental neglect, insecurity and isolation undergird capitalist, shallow consumer-obsessed culture and reaffirm the ideals of family and community. The novel could be understood as being more about violence than consumerism; except *Twelve*'s central message is as much about the problematic effects of capitalist individualism as it is about gun violence. Comparably, Melvin Burgess's *Junk* (1996) was received as controversial because of its protagonist's relationship with heroin. Although the characters are anarchic in that they flout social conventions of conformity by running away, squatting, and enjoying heroin, the ideological message is not quite moral relativism – it is that drugs are harmful and destructive: away from their shared love of heroin, Gemma and Tar's love was drug dependent. Gemma manages to overcome her addiction, and re-join society, but Tar still struggles with addiction at the end of the novel and becomes violent like his father. The cultural context for O'Neill's work, I argue, has meant that the complexity and variety of ways in which her work relates tosome aspects of feminism and not others have not been explored critically.

3. iii. *International YA Authors: Their Texts and Their Concerns*

YA authors, publishers and critics are increasingly concerned with avoiding an "othering" of the reader. Progressively, this means that there tends to be a more diverse range of characters in YA books, but the need for diversity across YA publishing and academia is still great. Melanie Ramdarshan Bold's *Inclusive Young Adult Fiction* – an investigation of the output

and experiences of ethnic minority YA authors in the UK during the period 2006 to 2016 – strongly argues for the need for real diversity among publishers and marketers as well as authors. In "Brown Girl Dreaming of a New ChLA", Michelle H. Martin highlights the lack of diversity in YA scholarship: "if you counted up *all* of the scholarship that has been written about, say, African American children's and YA literature, it would likely not equal the amount of scholarship that has been published just on *Little Women*"(2017, 102). As mentioned earlier, the drive for diversity in YA publishing is open to manipulation in the extent that it has become popular content. Aspects of empowerment movements have been commodified and marketed as part of a brand in a mainstream manner. The youth literature publishing industry is majorly subject to capitalist appropriation of on-trend ideals – these aspects of culture have an impact on the type of books being written, marketed and consumed. Appetitefor ideologically political and inclusive content has effected the production and reception of YA literature in a similar way to advertising and mass media. This can lead to certain novels like *The Children of Blood and Bone* – Nigerian-American YA novelist Tomi Adeyemi's book, published in 2018 – becoming blockbusters on the back of merit but also because of substantial marketing budgets. This means that other worthy books by ethnic minority authors with less representation receive far less exposure. An increase in diverse books also leads to problems regarding evaluation. *The Nowhere Girls* (2017) and *The Hate U Give*(2018) make for good comparison regarding evaluation, in that the former's strained depiction of diversity is of detriment to its narrative integrity, while the latter's politicalmessage blends skilfully with its authentically wrought narrative

Writing for *The Atlantic* about the "radicalisation of bedtime stories" Joe Pinkser expresses a wariness about the genuine nature of diversity in children's literature. He makes the point that although children's books increasingly feature marginalised identities (in 2015, about fourteen percent of American children's literature titles were about people who weren't White, rising to twenty five percent in 2017) the increase in diversity is in characters, not

authors. The *CLPE Overview of Ethnic Minority Presence in UK Children's Literature* showed that seven percent of books published in 2018 featured ethnic minority characters, and just four percent as a main character. While Pinkser does not consider that diversity in fictional representation and diversity in authorship are separate (albeit related) matters, his article is useful in that it points to the necessity for ideological interrogation of contemporary young adult literature that presents progressive left-wing liberal narratives to do with social equality. In comparison to historical moral forces in children's literature that provided socialising instruction on prayer and hygiene, today's texts may seem more progressive and less didactic, but this may not necessarily be the case. Certainly, it is not the case in O'Neill's works. I defend this statement with a discussion on O'Neill's oppressive authorial presence in her novels in Chapter Two.

3. iv. *Relationship to Contemporary Concerns in Irish YA Literature*

As it has strived for more diversity, American children's and YA literature has experienced difficulties in terms of its treatment of suppressed or underrepresented voices. The difficulties that surround efforts to strike a balance between raising awareness of the appropriation of narratives, which belong to minorities, while allowing for an imaginative extension beyond one's lived experiences, are evident in many current disputes and debates about contemporary American and international YA. Cases where YA authors have been obligated to redact their works prior to publication because of (mostly online) reactions to their treatment of marginalised identities or a perceived controversial or offensive aspect in their work indicate the complex interconnectedness between culture (in this instance the particular facet, "cancel culture") and young adult literature. American children's and YA literature's relationship with youth culture, and broader culture, combined with its longer tradition of advocating for social change, offers opportunities for significant comparative reflection with Irish youth literature and culture.

The international novels discussed in this dissertation address current social and cultural phenomena pertinent to young women and girls today, such as female sexuality and body image, rape and abuse; they explore the complicated negotiations of power and privilege within sexual encounters and interrogate gender. A close critical examination of American YA texts (Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*, 1999 and Isabel Quintero's *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces*, 2014) dealing with similar themes to O'Neill's across a period from the 90s, before O'Neill, and into the period contemporary with O'Neill, illustrates the evolution of an increasingly balanced and nuanced approach to subject matter that has developed over time and in correlation with cultural change. Nonetheless, these novels are not free from didacticism or related problems.

While this dissertation takes the British tradition of YA literature broadly into account, specific emphasis is given to American – in addition to Irish – youth culture and literature, as being most influential to the works of Louise O'Neill. Although I summarise the tradition of writing for young adults in the United States as having become more fully developed earlier than its Irish counterpart, I do not intend to suggest that within that tradition, there does not exist a level of didacticism that, to an extent, runs counter to the conception of a reformist strain of literature for the young. Many scholars have acknowledged that problem novels written in the tradition of "New Realism" in American and British writing for young adults during the period that Cart denotes as the "first golden age" of American YA are particularly laden with moral didacticism. As the subject matter of YA novels grew to include increasingly personal and political adolescent problems, they took on a more didactic emphasis (Carter 2000, 9). As Michael Cart describes it, "the subject matter too often became the tail that wagged the dog of the novel – the result being the appearance and swift ascendency of what has come to be called the 'problem novel'" (2011, 64).

Speak was published during Cart's second "golden age" of American YA literature

and during a period of American cultural history in which instances of sexual assault on college campuses caused protests and widespread public debate about sexual status quo, abuse and power to the fore. *Speak* was deemed ground-breaking at the time and is still celebrated, but, importantly, it is also now recognised as presenting problematic ideologies to do with victim response to rape and sexual assault.

Halse Anderson examines acquaintance rape in *Speak.* After what began as a consensual kiss at a high school party, Melinda's school mate Andy rapes her. Melinda calls the police but finds that she cannot speak. Melinda's peers ostracise her for having called the police but not explaining why. After Andy tries to assault her a second time, Melinda fights back and stops him. The novel concludes with Melinda "finding her voice" by telling her art teacher about her experience of sexual assault. Melinda's recovery highlights the merit in O'Neill's works: chiefly its depiction of barriers to resistance in instances of oppression – gendered, sexual andother. Overall, though, comparisons with *Speak* and the other texts, serve to highlight how O'Neill's narrative construct, which sets up the adult world as a destructive force (and by extension the male world because power constructs are largely perceived as being patriarchal), provides a thwarted sense of the individual's capacity to adapt or, at least, critically examine inherited legacies for the young adult reader. *Speak* is analysed in greaterdetail in Chapter Three's examination of "rape myths" in YA literature.

Speak deals directly with the experience of rape; Quintero's novel, *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* explores rape and sexual violence against women concerning broader culture. The novel explores contemporary Latina identity and narrates Gabi's struggles with her father's drug addiction, body image and a friend's rape and pregnancy during her senior year at high school. Unlike O'Neill's protagonists, Gabi realises the spurious nature of many of the oppressive standards of gendered normativity to which she is made subject. She experiences a mixture of empathy and acceptance for the complex nature of how the gendered expectations placed upon her have been formed as part of her traditional Mexican heritage.

As well as this, Gabi acknowledges that societal gender conventions affect others in a variety of ways. Quintero's *Gabi*, serves as an example of how other young adult writers offer depictions of how adolescents, particularly girls, might resist dominant ideological paradigms without it resulting in annihilation or a reinscribing of those patterns of domination for others. *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* is drawn upon in greater detail in Chapter Two's examination of how YA works foreground and complicate the relationship between adolescent identity and dominant culture, and in Chapter Three, concerning the novels' depictions of emerging sexuality and perceived "rape culture".

As well as these American texts, and the selection of Irish YA novels – ranging from the late twentieth century to those contemporary with O'Neill – O'Neill's fiction is further considered in relation to other YA novels addressing similar issues in different contexts, where relevant, such as Australian author Helen Barnes' YA novel *Killing Aurora* – set in 1990's Australia, published in 1999, and now regrettably out of print. The novel draws on the experiences of two central teenage characters: Web, who despises the expectations of femininity placed upon her, and Aurora, Web's schoolmate, whose mental and physical deterioration increases as she suffers from anorexia. The novel is examined in Chapter Two in comparison with O'Neill's texts, concerning their exploration of the relationship between cultural emphasis on female idealisation in the media and women's relationships with their bodies.

Having contextualised O'Neill's works within Irish and international traditions of writing for children and young adults, and social struggles of national and international significance, I now turn to provide an overview of feminist theory and developments in the twentieth and twenty-first-century.

Feminism and Poststructuralism

Distinct from the other Irish and international texts used for comparison, O'Neill's texts, in

particular, invite readings in light of a tradition of feminist theory. Frequent intertextual allusions to feminist academic and popular writing in O'Neill's works challenge the reader to address issues central to feminist discussion. O'Neill's young adult fiction exemplifies the increasing overlap between feminist theory, literature and popular culture. The broad overview of feminist theory provided here is developed and drawn upon in subsequent chapters to situate O'Neill's works in light of current tensions surrounding the scholarship and criticism in the field of feminist theory. In situating O'Neill within a burgeoning feminist aesthetic and examining the influence of her texts on young adults – in terms of how they propose new ways of thinking about power and gender that are liberating for the implied reader – it is necessary to examine in detail the state of feminism today, as well as its origins.

4. i. *A Brief History of Feminism*

The history of feminism is typically divided into waves; with four waves of feminist thought and activity being identified by feminist historians, and a current fifth wave in progress. Despite the nomenclature of using "waves" to talk about the evolving nature of feminism, in her forward to *How To Be A Woman* (2011) Caitlin Moran is sceptical about the usefulness of the terms. She argues, "I don't know if we can talk about "waves" of feminism anymore – by myreckoning, the next wave would be the fifth, and I suspect it's around the fifth wave that you stop referring to individual waves and start to refer, simply, to an incoming" (foreword).

Although I agree with Moran, I use the term waves for clarity in this chapter. Feminism is multifaceted, nuanced and composed of several different schools of thought. The question ofsimilarity and difference between the sexes has historically caused competing schools of feminist thought to diverge. Nevertheless, while feminism cannot be described as a uniform set of ideologies, the recurrent aims of the feminist project – so it seems – is to expose the fact that women have not been afforded the same social, economic

and political rights as men, to question why that is so, and to re-examine the experiences of women.

4. ii. *First and Second-Wave Feminism*

The origins of the first wave can largely be attributed to Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication on the Rights of Woman* (1792). Wollstonecraft's writings and her unconventional lifestyle (she had her first child out of wedlock) helped inspire the change that resulted in the attribution of legal rights, suffrage and power to women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Writing against a long tradition of women's perceived inferiority to men, Wollstonecraft critiqued the patriarchal discourse of Enlightenment thinkers by arguing for women's rights to education and agency. She equated Rousseau's expression of male anxiety around the education of women, and his assertion that the education of women ought to be entirely relative to men in *Emile* (1762) to slavery.

Persistent belief in biological determinism and binary differences between "male" and "female" brains (now more commonly understood as "neurosexism") stems from the nineteenth century when the weight of a brain determined its intelligence; women's brains on average weighed less than men's and were therefore thought to be lacking. O'Neill's treatment of school, teachers and education in *Only Ever Yours* and *Asking For It* critiques the legacy of such assumptions about gender in today's culture. O'Neill characterises the eves in *Only Ever Yours* as slaves: their education is entirely relative to men. The eves who become educators (chastities) are stripped of their female identity – their wombs are removed – and their beauty – they have shaved skulls and wear "cavernous black robes" (21). The eves who become companions or concubines are defined by beauty and their female identity – so much so that their sole education revolves around ways to improve and maintain it. In *Asking For It*, Fitzy's surprise at his girlfriend Maggie's capacity to be "pretty, but … still smart *and* funny…you can't say that about too many girls" (25) signifies lasting cultural stereotypes

about the binary nature of beauty and intellect, and critiques the sexist view that women should be "allowed a mind or a body but not both" (Wolf 1991, 59).

Through a process of repetition, discriminatory mistruths and generalisations can become normalised in popular consciousness to the extent that genders, nationalities, cultures, races, classes – indeed, any category – can be reduced accordingly. O'Neill's texts demonstrate a concern with cultural stereotypes applied to women in a society that promotes their reduction and allows for their mistreatment, especially in terms of their sexuality. Laura Mulvey articulated these concerns in her investigation into the gendered nature of roles in cinema narratives: *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, 1975, where she argues that female roles are largely reduced to either fetishism or exploitation because of the threat their sexual difference poses to a mostly male power structure. O'Neill's texts depict how, to the extent that they are believed, such beliefs can have a negative psychological power that affects public and private attitudes and values and effectively communicates what culture expects. Feminist scholars across media studies have long since shared interest in these matters and film theory (Van Zoonen 1994, *Feminist Media*; Milkie, 2002, "Contested Images"; McRobbie 2004, "Post-feminism"). Other critics (Ramdarshan Bold 3) uphold the power of "core cultural industries" (film is only one, others include publishing, video and computer games, advertising and other forms of broadcasting) to maintain hegemonic power structures but also argue that such mediums disrupt them (Hesmondhalgh 1992, *The Cultural*; Saha, 2018 *Race;* Ramdarshan Bold, 2019 *Inclusive*). For example, Ramdarshan Bold emphasises how even among those living in cosmopolitan, multicultural cities, film and media can be a significant space for meaningfully encountering otherness (4).

O'Neill's texts offer further direct parallels with second-wave feminism, which, in line with Wollstonecraft's much earlier proposal that marriage ought to be born out of companionship rather than slavery, brought issues such as contraception, domestic violence, and marital rape to the fore. This second wave – in the 1960's and 1970's – encouraged

women to recognise how society, education, the home and the workplace discriminated against them. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, 1949, is commonly regarded as the starting point of second-wave feminism. In it, she poses the question, "What is woman?", and argues that "woman" is "other". Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, 1963, sparked feminist dialogue first in America and then across the Western world, by questioning societal expectations of women, especially their "natural" affinity to childrearing and housework. Her work foregrounds the role of advertising and the Second World War in galvanising these expectations and presents the damaging effects of such expectations on the female psyche, emotions and intellect.

O'Neill's texts deliberately dialogue with concerns raised by de Beauvoir and subsequently built upon by Freidan, concerning society's perception of women as inferior others, whose marginalised position was natural and acceptable. At the forefront of the texts' engagement with these aspects of second-wave feminism is the aim of demonstrating continued significance to modern Irish and Western society. De Beauvoir's, "He is subject; he is the absolute. She is the Other" (3) is realised in the extreme in *Only Ever Yours* in which schools are formed to house the eves until they become "of use" in terms of the three options available to them. Most eves (including freida) see their options as most to least appealing in the following order: companion, concubine, chastity. The eves weigh up each respective role with the same naïve temerity as school girls weighing up college options and career paths. The role of companion is most desired because it affords a measure of respect: a companion will have economic support, be a mother of sons, and gain social status above other eves. This is applicable to women in some societies today or recently, such as China, where the legacy of its one-child family planning policy continue to affect fertility and education (Zhang 2017, 141). It is less relevant to women in contemporary Western society, especially economically privileged women, who are O'Neill's focus. The eves are schooled to believe that they are subordinate and that their subservience to men is appropriate in a way

that would more fittingly critique nineteenth-century women's disenfranchisement of rights or mid-twentieth century women's economic dependence on marriage.

Many of the eves consider life as a concubine more appealing than that of a companion because they will be spared the youth-sapping process of continued child-bearing. The role of chastity is most despised. freida's thoughts inform the reader about the eves' disfavour for the role: she thinks, as a chastity you are "faced with a lifetime of caring for newer, more nubile students as you grow old and decrepit, without the luxury of a Termination Date appointed to preserve your beauty" (51). The connotations of the characterisation of the chastity as working to educate and imprison the eves within the religious order of The School under the authoritarian leadership of The Father in *Only Ever Yours* could be interpreted as drawing parallels with nuns in charge of "fallen" women in Irish institutions, such as Laundries under the leadership of the Catholic Church. This interpretation, however, may only hold true in consideration of the weight of O'Neill's other focuses. This reading of the text is given further consideration in Chapter Two where O'Neill's work is compared alongside that of other contemporary Irish YA authors who share a concern with highlighting the legacy of Ireland's history of institutional abuse against women on the lives of young women today.

4. iii. *Theories of Power and Agency in Second-Wave Feminist Thought*

Theories of power and agency are key to feminist theory and to O'Neill's texts. Thus, a Foucauldian framework can be applied to the examination of power structures depicted in the novels and the roles of the protagonists in resisting or capitulating to these. Foucault's theory of power, outlined in *Discipline and Punish*, 1975, describes a "disciplining society" in which power is largely exercised through regulatory means in a variety of institutions, such as schools, prisons, militaries and hospitals. The limited avenues of power available to the eves echo De Beauvoir's arguments and align with more contemporary feminist theorist

Marilyn French's feminist appropriation of Foucault's theory of power as being both "power-to, which refers to ability, capacity, and connotes a kind of freedom" and "power-over, which refers to domination" (1985, 6). The power structures in *Only Ever Yours* represent Foucault's "disciplining society" as inherently patriarchal in structure. Each of the roles available to the eves offer a limited measure of power and freedom: the chastities exert control over the eves whilst remaining free from the "duties of the other thirds" (51); the role of concubine provides the eves with a sisterhood and collective power of sorts; and the role of companion offers the eves a chance at ultimate "power-over" – the position as "number one eve/ companion". Regardless, the highest power available for any eve is always "power-over" rather than "power-to", subject as they are to greater male power.

The models of control used on prisoners that Foucault describes (examination, constant surveillance and normalisation) can be applied to other systems of power, such as schools' control over students or multinational corporations' control over employees. The employee who eventually independently polices themselves by adhering to the normalised standards of a "good employee" by moderating their appearance and performance according to company ideals can be understood as adhering to Foucault's models of control: he or she is at once a controlled subject and an active participant in supporting the system of control. The power acted out over the female protagonists in O'Neill's texts, through the media they consume or the institutions and societies to which they belong, is shown to sway them towards becoming active participants in supporting the very system of control which oppresses them.

Whereas Foucault did not relate gender with power, de Beauvoir's and Freidan's representation of gender as a construct shows women to be subject to an imbalance of power between the sexes. O'Neill's texts reflect de Beauvoir's claim that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (301). In both *Only Ever Yours* and *Asking For It*, O'Neill employs recurring allusions to "masks" and "performing" in order to demonstrate the damaging

effects of gender as a learned construct for young women and girls. De Beauvoir promotes the idea that there is nothing natural or inherent about femininity. Freidan furthers her argument about the social and cultural construction of femininity by contending that society's belief in women as "natural" homemakers and mothers justified the status quo and the division of power in favour of men. Her work interrogated the possibility for women's true agency in the face of a dominant patriarchal culture and the indoctrination of mainstream discourses, in which women are depicted as lacking, via mass media and advertising. Likewise, the extremely polarised, dystopian society in *Only Ever Yours* works to accuse patriarchal systems of the creation and preservation of gendered, stereotyped tropes and sexism in today's mass culture.

The construction of the female body in O'Neill's text reflects Judith Butler's concept of the performativity of gender – subsequently built upon by Irish academic Emer O'Toole in *Girls Will Be Girls* (2016). In *Asking For It*, girls' bodies are restricted and passive, whilst boys' bodies are free and active. In the summer heat, the schoolgirls are "flushed and uncomfortable" in the school uniform that their principal insists must be "worn in its entirety, no matter what the weather" (12). Emma describes herself as exhausted: "I have to smile and be nice and look like I care about other people's problems or else I'll get called a bitch" (13). Repeated allusions to performance in the text do more than indicate women characters' subservience to maintaining attractiveness. Emma acts as a focaliser for O'Neill's feminist didacticism about the social and cultural construction of femininity when she thinks, "people don't understand how exhausting it is to have to put on this performance all day" (13)

4. iv. *The Relevance of Second-Wave Feminism Today*

The problems faced by the eves correspond with the challenges faced by women in patriarchal societies acknowledged and analysed in the work of de Beauvoir and Freidan. According to de Beauvoir, the complex politics of women's lives meant that they could either

be “vassal women” – who exchange freedom for economic and social gain by marrying men – or “independent women” – who are caught between the desire to live out a female (heterosexual) destiny and the desire to function independently (*The Second*). Significant cultural shifts concerning women’s roles as primary care-givers and their economic independence complicate the legitimacy of O’Neill’s social criticism. This is especially the case with *Asking For It,* which seems to suggest that all women today are still subject to the same challenges that women faced over half a century ago. As well as this, O’Neill’s depiction of Emma’s mother as a particularly desperate and powerless domestic figure in *Asking For It* echoes a condescension that is evident in de Beauvoir’s polarising attitude to women as either “vassal” or “independent”.

Demands for education, votes and access to personal freedom outside of marriage and the home were no longer at the forefront of feminist activism in Ireland at the time of *Asking For It*’s setting: 2015. The “Policy on Gender Equality in Ireland – Update 2015” report states, “family size has reduced dramatically, women’s educational attainment levels have increased and the majority of women are now in paid employment, concentrated in both public and private services” (8). However, the report does maintain that “inequality continues to be a persistent feature of women’s position in Irish society” (7). The report details how women remain disadvantaged in the labour market, carry the main responsibility for unpaid care work, and are severely underrepresented in Irish political, economic and administrative systems (7).

The report also emphasised Ireland’s restrictive abortion laws – at that time the most restrictive in Europe (apart from Malta) – and the “prevalence of sexual and domestic violence” (8) with “little evidence of redress under the legal system” (7). By 2018, the year *Asking For It* was staged in Ireland’s national theatre, many of the legislative changes that the report called for had been sanctioned, meaning greater gender equality, access to abortion and

development in rape legislation – the legal definition of consent was entered into the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act in 2017. This change, underscored by having occurred within the three years between *Asking For It*'s publication and its staging in the Abbey, accentuates the complicatedness of interpreting O'Neill's text as a work of convincing social criticism of its time.

Pressure on Irish women today to choose between a career or a family is not as straightforward as in the mid-twentieth century when the Marriage Bar (1932-1973) required all women in the Civil Service to give up their jobs when married. Nevertheless, according to feminist author Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie, many women today are expected to have a career and a family regardless of the challenges; women are now subject to the ideal of "doing it all" [as are men]. She argues that such debate is problematic because it assumes that caregiving and domestic work are singularly female domains, and suggests that asking whether women can "do it all" is counterproductive to what ought to be the focus: gender-neutral attitudes to how parental and home duties can be balanced with work (2017).

The idea that "doing it all" is a pressure that only affects women and that it affects all women equally is concerning. The challenge of "doing it all" is one of the key issues facing men and women today – many people struggle with striking a work-life balance. The conception of "doing it all" as most specific to women takes an overly narrow approach, somewhat like the approach taken to analysing gender representation in the workplace in the "Policy of Gender Equality" report mentioned earlier. This report only takes into account areas in which women are underrepresented. It does not consider areas where they are over-represented and men are underrepresented, such as teaching or nursing. Neither does it consider other reasons for under-representation in these areas, such as social class, ethnicity, religious non-belief, sexual orientation, or others. Furthermore, the challenge of "doing it all" is mostly a Western one, and it could be considered inconsequential compared to the challenges facing the most marginalised of women, where "success" constitutes very

different things.

The terms of "success" in *Only Ever Yours*, are not delineated by women, yet women internalise and perpetuate the rules. In *Asking For It,* too, O'Neill depicts a society in which the quest for beauty is so engrained in women, that women choose to go to greater and more damaging lengths to achieve it. The questions this raises about agency are explored in detail as one of the central concerns in Chapter Two. In Chapter Four, notions of optimization, individualism and consumerism are applied to the terms of "success" in *Only Ever Yours*, and this broadens out the texts' commentary concerning powerful oppressive forces beyond its direct examination of gender.

4. v. *Third-Wave Feminism, Post-Feminism and Intersectional Feminism*

Following Betty Freidan's argument that confining women to the realm of motherhood and housework denied them self-actualisation, third-wave feminist Naomi Wolf, argued that sex and beauty continued to represent women's only avenues to power in the 1990s. The third wave of feminism, beginning in the 1980s and early 1990s, is a continuation of, and response to, problematic elements of second-wave feminism, such as the dominance of White, European, middle-class feminist theorists and leaders of feminist movements. In response, alternative post-colonial and third-world feminism gained prominence. Whereas the second wave had focused on the attribution of rights and power for women, this third wave, largely influenced by Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*, 1991, called into question – among other things – the damaging effects of pornographic imagery, which was infiltrating the mainstream media, and the massive growth of the beauty industry.

At the same time as Wolf, however, there was a noticeable shift in broader cultural discourse that suggested that feminism had ended or that we had now entered a "postfeminist" era. This came about largely from the belief that feminism was no longer relevant, because we had come to an era where women were as empowered as men. Wolf

countered the notion that sexism and misogyny were no longer widespread in Western culture, by highlighting awareness about how women continue to be bound by traditional sexual and social roles – often being either sexualised or side-lined – and emphasising how greatly disadvantaged they were by the normative standards of beauty promoted by patriarchal structures. She stated that "more women have more money and power and scope and legal recognition than we have ever had before; but in terms of how we feel about ourselves physically, we may actually be worse off than our unliberated grandmothers" (*The Beauty* 10).

O'Neill's intertextual references allude to John Berger's contention in *Ways of Seeing* (1972) that attitudes andvalues, designed for male advantage, informed traditions in Western art, which consequentlyinformed culture and social behaviour. These attitudes, according to Berger, resulted in women being treated as "first and foremost, a sight" and fostered a damaging normalised version of femininity often upheld and perpetuated by women themselves (52). The narration, "watching, watchers, watched. We're all watching each other" in *Only Ever Yours* (144) resonates with Berger's, "men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (47). By referencing Berger, O'Neill consequently references Wolf, who built on Berger's ideas by arguing that "many women internalize Big Brother's eye" in *The Beauty Myth* (100).

In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault uses the metaphor of the panopticon – a prison structure – to demonstrate how the process of being monitored as a prisoner renders the prisoner self-monitoring. Similarly, Wolf uses the "beauty myth" to argue that women's slavish adherence to beauty regimes causes them to "internalize Big Brother's eye" and "pay for mutual surveillance" much to the detriment of their economic, physical and emotional well-being (1991, 100). She argued that by buying magazines that tell women to "always wear makeup, even if ... just walking the dog" and paying membership to weight loss programmes like *Weight Watchers*, women "pay for mutual surveillance" (100). Wolf

describes beauty as a full-time occupation, slavishly adhered to with religious fervour by women, much to the detriment of their economic, physical and emotional wellbeing. She presents modern society as dominated by a "beauty myth" that women are "so well-schooled in" that they have accepted and internalised its resulting "caste system" (84). A metaphorical manifestation of this "schooling" is enacted in the dystopian setting of *Only Ever Yours*. Reflecting how societal ideals of beauty are imposed on, and accepted by, or self-imposed by women today, the education that the eves receive is the cult of beauty played out to its most extreme and damaging lengths. For the eves, the school's patriarchal system of external surveillance results in their obsession with matriarchal self-surveillance, an internalisation of misogyny, and a consequent loss of agency and power.

O'Neill's depiction of women and girls in *Only Ever Yours* and *Asking For It*, captures Wolf's concerns with a particular focus on sexuality. Presiding ideals of sexuality and femininity are paramount to O'Neill's protagonists' beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, and are integral components in their construction of self as gendered, sexual beings. O'Neill's texts explore the effects of the confusing and damaging gender conventions perpetuated in advertising, porn and mass media imposed on young girls at the moment of their sexual development. The analysis of sexual power structures and the implied connection between pornography and patriarchy in O'Neill's texts captures and contemporises the aim of third-wave feminism to construct a politics of pleasure, made difficult by the media and popular culture of the late 80s and 90s that depended on, and overwhelmingly presented, a limited view of female sexuality riddled with moralism, judgement and double standards. Efforts, such as those made by Wolf in her 1993 text *Fighting Fire with Fire*, to discuss and promote sexual freedom and pleasure saw her, and other contemporary feminists, labelled as "do me feminists" in an *Esquire* article entitled "Feminist Women Who Like Sex" by Tad Friend. Articles like Friend's contributed to the misconstruing of Wolf and other's efforts to discuss the importance of women's sexual pleasure and agency, and led to a perceived division

between feminist factions, largely to do with arguments over the intersections between feminism and sexual liberation, and sex work.

As well as demonstrating a concern with an investigation of the intersections between the formation of female sexuality and advertising, porn and mass media, third-wave feminism was concerned with the variety of identities that women possess. Although it began to take diversity between women in terms of class and race into account, texts like Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* were criticised for largely ignoring issues not pertinent to White, Western women. Audre Lorde's 1984 essay *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* called for a recognition of the complexities of gender, class and race – something that a trend toward intersectionality in feminism has picked up on. The rise of social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram in recent years means that feminism and feminist voices have been amplified more than ever before. Because of this, there has been a growing awareness of the need for more inclusivity, not only in terms of race and class but also for trans-rights within the feminist movement.

Jessica Valenti's apology in the second edition of *Full Frontal Feminism* (2014, originally published in 2007) serves as an example of more inclusive feminism coming to the fore. She apologizes for how the original cover – featuring the title written on a toned, White woman's stomach – perpetuates the idea that feminism is for White women and, also, for how the text in its original form did not address or include transgender women. While not overtly concerned with third-wave feminism's endeavour for racial inclusivity, O'Neill's texts do engage with the "homogenizing" and "normalizing" images that Susan Bordo argues "visually legislate the effacement of individual and cultural difference and circumscribe our choices" (2004, 250). There are some suggestions in *Only Ever Yours* that the class stratification of women is not solely based on gender. For example, as well as being misogynistic, the text's society is depicted as racist. freida is discriminated against because of her "dark skin". *Only Ever Yours* refers to the global assimilation of a single beauty aesthetic

when the eves are shown images of the "women before" to compare themselves with. freida comforts herself that in the Euro-Zone they still have "some diversity, however marginal" (58). and freida's darker skin causes her anxiety. Girls with White skin are overwhelmingly chosen as more beautiful than girls with black skin in the comparison game "Your Face or Mine", leaving freida to feel such self-hatred that she wants to take "a grater to [her] skin, peeling off the top layer" that her "bones might be white enough" (72).

Western girls' struggles with Western beauty standards are the main delineation for discrimination in *Only Ever Yours*, so, to an extent, a full consideration of the complexities of intersectional inequalities is beyond the novel's scope. Having said this, aspects of *Only Ever Yours* do touch on experiences of women outside of the "Euro-Zone". The novel touches on how freida's darker skin causes her anxiety and, at one point, refers to "Afrika and Chindia Zones" where "only blonde, blue-eyed girls are designed…their past literally whitewashed" (58). Nevertheless, these moments of reflection around the homogenizing force of Western beauty standards and notions of othering are rare. Furthermore, this exploration only concerns these women in relation to their experience with the established White "Euro-Zone" beauty ideal and not with other inequities, such as poverty or religion or other variations that might exacerbate their experience of oppression.

4. vi. *Relevance of Third-Wave Feminism Today*

The eves in *Only Ever Yours* are held to a homogenized, male standard of beauty that seem more exemplary of historical than future attitudes. Wolf's critique of the lasting cultural stereotype that women cannot be both beautiful and intelligent – now over twenty-five years old – seems something of a far reach within today's value system and popular culture. Representations of intelligent girl characters, such as Lisa Simpson in *The Simpsons* or Hermione in The Harry Potter series, counter traditional representations of intellect as a male quality (Sherlock Holmes, Doctor Spock, Doctor Who). Nonetheless, aspects of media and

popular culture continue to offer a limited representation of female sexuality mired by moral judiciousness and double standards. The 2017 publication in several British tabloids of nude photographs – taken six years previously in connection to a different role – of actress Jodie Whittaker, who had just been announced as taking the role of the first female "Doctor Who", exemplifies the opposing nature of how women are sometimes treated in situations of power in comparison to men. For example, papers did not publish nude or semi-nude photographs of David Tennant and Matt Smith after their casting announcement. More reputable papers, with a history of representing progressive attitudes towards gender equality, likewise often demonstrate vast differences in how women are written about or interviewed. For example, women in positions of political power, such as Hilary Clinton and Theresa May, were often written about during their time in power in terms of their appearance or fertility choices in more critical detail than their male counterparts. Moreover, women writers are more likely to be asked questions about managing their work alongside motherhood than male authors are asked about fatherhood.

These examples legitimize the continuing relevance of Melissa A. Milkie's argument – made in 2002 – that "a central way that women's disadvantage is created and maintained is through cultural beliefs and stereotypes that provide narrower, more distorted or harmful images about women than about men" (839). Conversely, the ironic treatment of sexist tropes in contemporary media often exposes and undermines gendered stereotyping ofmen and women and promotes equality. As I consider in Chapter Two, examples of modern advertising and youth publishing that work in this way follow on more progressively and successfully from similar campaigns in the 90s that, although they sent up sexism, simultaneously undermined its necessity.

4. vii. *Theories of Masculinity*

Writing in 2017, Patricia Kennon argued that "to date, studies of gender issues in young adult

dystopian novels have been dominated by a focus on constructions of female subjectivity, girlhood, and the potential for female empowerment" ("Monsters of Men" abstract). Kennon says that "little critical attention has been correspondingly dedicated to examining how regimes of masculinity, traditional privileges of male power, and male adolescence are represented and mediated in dystopian fiction for teenagers" (abstract). Kennon's scholarship redresses this imbalance by analysing normative and transgressive embodiments of masculinity in Patrick Ness's dystopian Chaos Walking series. Despite theissues that O'Neill addresses in her work – gender, sex, and consent – involving men and women, dominant discourses about her work in the media and in scholarship focus exclusively on women.

A comprehensive analysis of theories of masculinity(ies) is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, critics, such as R.W. Connell and, particularly, Peggy Orenstein inform my examination of masculinity concerning my argument about how O'Neill's one-dimensional treatment of hierarchies depicts essentialised conceptions of gender.Peggy Orenstein's *Boys and Sex*, 2020, examines how modern ideas about gender affect boys. Orenstein's earlier work, *Girls and Sex*, 2016, focused on highlighting how girls devalued themselves in sexual interactions. She found that most girls felt caught between being considered a "slut" or a "prude", and that this endangered girls' sexual health and mental and physical well-being. In her more recent *Boys and Sex*, Orenstein finds that boys are similarly in a state of constant negotiation, "trying to live out more modern ideas about gender yet unwilling or unable to let go of the old one (11). Orenstein advocates for further discussion about how conceptions of manhood constrain boys. She argues that there is a "broad agreement that the incessant sexualisation of women in the media hurts girls" and although this affects boys too, girls are far more regularly afforded with opportunities to discuss how to challenge and contextualise such images. The fact that Orenstein addresses boys' experiences in what she terms the "other half of the conversation" about young adults' experiences of sex and consent is highly significant to my examination of O'Neill's works. In

light of Orenstein's study of boys, the conversation O'Neill advocates for – especially with *Asking For It* – seems very one-sided and leaves little room for alternative perspectives.

Although O'Neill's works are primarily concerned with undermining femininity's constructed nature, configurations of heterosexual, traditional masculinity(ies) are not examined in the same way. Violence and aggression are strongly emphasised as masculine characteristics and seem to be acknowledged as biologically determined behaviours. This emphasis is underscored by efforts across the works to cast men as having both moulded and maintained women's passivity fortheir pleasure and gain.

4. viii. *The Linguistic Turn and Material Turn in Feminist Theory*

In recent years, modern feminist theorists and children's literature scholars working in the field of feminist research have signalled the serious liabilities as well as advantages in feminist theory that has been influenced by postmodern and poststructuralist thought (Trites 2018, xii; Alaimo and Hekman et al., 2008, 1). They advocatefor a "material turn" – one that does not discount the merits of the previous "linguistic turn", but rather develops a feminist theory that conceives of social identities as both constructed and real: a "material feminism" that is aware of how the biological and the social interact.

Linguistic-discursive-focused feminist theory founded on the social construction models ofpostmodernist, post-structural thought are acknowledged by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman as having been "enormously productive for feminism" for how they "fostered complex analyses of the interconnections between power, knowledge, subjectivity and language" (1). Alaimo and Hekman reflect on how feminist theory and practice have been enriched by the "linguistic turn" influenced by postmodernist, poststructuralist thought, such as Michel Foucault's poststructuralist theory of social identity as constructed, which led to the conception of gender as a performance of discourse advanced by Judith Butler, among others, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first-century. They remark that "it (postmodern theory) has allowed feminists to

understand how gender has been articulated with other volatile markings, such as class, race, and sexuality within cultural systems of difference thatfunction like a language (à la Ferdinand de Saussure)" (1). Postmodern feminism's strength, Alaimo and Hekman establish, has been its argument that the male/female dichotomy upon which Western thought has, since its inception, been based "informs all dichotomies that ground Western thought: culture/nature, mind/body, subject/object, rational/emotional, and countless others" (1). Judith Butler's feminist, queer theory challenges the notion that genderis part of the essential self (a key part of Beauvoirian analysis is that biology is an "essential element") and interrogates the socially constructed nature of sexual behaviour and categories. Feminist and gender theorists "hypotheses" of gender such as these have been hugely influential to the interrogation of gendered dichotomies and essentialist concepts of gender in the field of feminist study within children's and adolescent literature in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Nonetheless, Roberta Seelinger Trites argues that feminist children's literature and YA criticism, like feminist theory, need to consider how thesocial and the biological interact.

Considering twenty-first-century feminism in children's and adolescent literature in the 2019 companion text to *Waking Sleeping Beauty* – her investigation of feminist voices in children's novels, published in 1997 – Trites describes how twentieth-century feminist critics of children's and adolescent literature "helped feminism explode as a field of study" (xvi). She says feminist youth literature critics in the first decade of the twenty-first century were committed to understanding gender as a social construct and to "pushing the boundaries of the field into exploration of nuanced readings of gender, sex, and sexuality within cultural contexts" (xvi). Writing in 2019, Trites argues modern feminism is about "more than the status of women in society … feminism has evolved as a reflection of the issues that supress equality for all". Like Alaimo, Hekman et al., Trites argues that feminism's tendency to focus on the discursive at the expense of the material has been beneficial yet reductive. Applying

material feminism's ideas to YA literature will not, according to Trites, disregard an examination of relationships and empowerment: "it is still important that a young female protagonist be empowered", she states, "but there's much more to be explored than just social power" (xvi). According to Alaimo, Hekman et al., postmodernism has failed as a theoretical grounding for feminism: "focusing exclusively on representations of ideology and discourse excludes lived experience, corporeal practice, and biological substance from consideration" (4). Many, they maintain, have argued that "the denouncement of essentialism has become a rigid orthodoxy, more prohibitive and policing than productive" (17).

This rigid orthodoxy is evident in how O'Neill constructs her characters and presents a reductive view of gender identity. Gender and self are so intrinsically linked in her texts that characters, particularly male characters, are stereotypically "male". Femininity and masculinity are presented as binaries rather than spectrums, although gender is only a constraint for women and girls, not men.

4. ix. *Sex, Money, Power*

> "Feminism really means the progression of the female sex,
> not the thwarting of it in the name of supposed universal victimhood"
> Anna Arrowsmith (*Sex, Money, Power* interview, 2015)

O'Neill's representation of girls as liberated and free from the need for feminism satirises corporate entities that repackage beauty regimes and surgeries as "feminist" or "empowering" for capitalist gain. However, by strongly emphasising the media's hegemonic power in its various forms (advertising, popular culture, TV, social media and others) as purely patriarchal, the texts fail to consider how women often exploit this power. Women in the real world are far more powerful and far more capable of abusing power than the women in O'Neill's texts. Furthermore, by only focusing on harmful constructions of femininity, the texts ignore damaging productions of masculinity in the media.

Contemporary feminists Caitlin Moran and Anna Arrowsmith, among others, oppose

anti-porn feminists Andrea Dworkin and MacKinnon, who in the 80s fought for all porn to be banned by asserting that it encourages and excuses men to act out rape. Arrowsmith contends that the casual link between rape and pornography popularised by Dworkin and MacKinnon is "anti both men and sexuality" and that the focus on porn avoids the real reasons why rape happens. Moran resists the notion that porn is innately sexist: "the act of having sex isn't sexist so there's no way pornography can be, in itself, inherently misogynist" (35).

Throughout *Only Ever Yours*, the eves are depicted as painfully regulated and diminished by beauty standards promoted in porn. In preparation for "the Ceremony" (the day the Inheritants choose an eve), freida waxes "every last hair" on her body (283). The adverts that they watch include an "advert for vaginal bleaching cream" and "one for a new laser treatment that promises to remove any unsightly body hair" (63). At one point, O'Neill references photographs of actress Julia Roberts waving to fans revealing her underarm hair published in the media in 1999 when "famous" eve amber, a member of the band "slutz", is publicly shamed doing the same thing: "the camera zooms in, a red arrow pointing out the shadowing of stubble across her armpit" (63). Arrowsmith questions the validity of assuming women's disempowerment because they choose to shave their underarms and points out that many men in porn wax or shave far greater areas of skin. Arrowsmith also contends that porn "disrupts ideas about beauty standards" and creates, far more than TV and film, a "democratisation of the body" by including a broad variety of bodies for wide-ranging sexual preferences ("Men's Body Image").

Other contemporary feminists, like Kat Banyard, have an opposing view. Banyard argues that the mainstreaming of the porn industry has a catastrophic effect on young girls concerning beauty ideals, and both young girls and boys regarding learning sexuality. Although O'Neill's texts, like Banyard's criticism, raise an important argument about how women's disadvantage is maintained through more narrow and distorted images of women than of men in popular culture, comparing this with the "flickering images" that

"anaesthetise" the eves "into silence" in *Only Ever Yours* is problematic (125). It undermines girls' power as active, critical readers of such messaging and is in danger of presenting women as perpetual victims rather than in more empowering terms. Assumptions about links between porn and learning sexuality also tread dangerously close to making assumptions about people's – especially young people's – ability to tell the difference between entertainment and reality.

Significantly, young people's innovative utilisations of the media to deconstruct power and promote equality, like the examples of youth magazine and journal publishing I refer to in Chapter Two, are not represented in O'Neill's work. Examples of activism carried out by young people via media platforms and contemporary advertising that satirises sexism by drawing attention to, and consequently undermining, sexist ideology emphasise the significant gap between O'Neill's portrayal of young girls and boys and their real-life counterpoints. Some examples of progress I draw upon in Chapter Two concerning mass media's increasingly broadened portrayal of "beauty" and consequent deconstruction of what is deemed "normal", acceptable and rewarded in popular culture occurred after the publication of *Only Ever Yours* and *Asking For It*. Nevertheless, the hypocrisy of much of the messaging that young women receive about beauty, sex and "empowerment" that O'Neill satirises was, at their time of writing, already frequently exposed and commonly understood as disingenuous (Wolf, 1994).

Melissa A. Milkie's study on girls' relationships with narrow images of female beauty in media in 2002 found that girls and women "actively criticize and resist" the dominant messaging that they receive, indicating young people's ability to thwart the influence of the media, make their own decisions, and resist ideological messages about femininity (841). By way of further complication, O'Neill's depiction of dominant media messaging lacks consideration of how, in many ways, pressure on young men is strikingly like that on young women in contemporary Western society. In 2015 Arrowsmith argued that vanity and the

concern about one's looks was still largely being conceived of as "quite a feminine obsession" and therefore "dangerously feminising for men to admit to" ("Men's Body Image"). Depictions of men and women in O'Neill's texts adhere rigidly to the notion that women are subject to higher standards of physical surveillance by society. Arrowsmith describes this as "largely still true" but maintains that men also have to live up to "ridiculous masculine ideals" and are doing so without any of the political discussion being afforded to women concerning the issue. Largely, none of this nuance appears in O'Neill's characterisation of men.

In *Only Ever Yours* Darwin is depicted as thwarted by his father, a hyper-masculine figure, in that he denies his feelings for freida and follows his father's orders. However, O'Neill only presents the notion of a perfect, unachievable body type as brought to bear on women and girls' bodies. When the eves see the Inheritants for the first time, freida thinks, "it's funny to see the differences in their heights and weights and facial features" in contrast with the "uniformity" of the eves' "perfection" (129/130). The eves' educational and cultural interactions strongly disseminate a stereotypical reductive expectation of femininity. Although boys' clothing and toys often promote similarly reduced definitions of masculinity in the real world there are no details of Darwin or any of the other Inheritants in the text being subject to clothes, toys or regimes of bodily maintenance that promote hyper-masculinity in the way that it is comparable with how the eves are subject to campaigns for hyper-femininity. By amplifying the eves' experiences as more extremely negatively impinged on by the prominence of hyper-feminine and hyper-masculine figures in popular culture than the Inheritants', the text suggests that this is uniformly the case in the real world.

Furthermore, across O'Neill's works, dominance is presented as uniquely masculine rather than acknowledged as existing within various situations. Submissiveness is uniquely feminine (albeit culturally constructed and socially enforced). This classification of power as exclusively about gender presents a misleading conception that almost entirely excludes

broader sociocultural contexts and inequalities (ethnicity, class, sexuality, race, ability and others) embedded in relations of domination and control. The focus on drawing attention to gender as binary and dominant representations of the relationship between femininity and feminism in the texts leaves them out-of-step with feminist intersectional thought and criticism, which complicates and counters essentialist constructions of identity in the works.

My appraisal of O'Neill's works as focusing too narrowly on constructions of gender, primarily concerned with Western, White women's struggle to gain empowerment and equality in a post-feminist era, without recognition of the distinctness of human experience and the various embodiments of oppression, draws parallels with third-wave feminism's critique of second-wave feminism's promotion of bourgeois White women's attainment of social equality without any consideration of class and race. The works deliberately dialogue with the post-feminist argument that elements of contemporary popular culture undermine the feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s by perniciously "undoing feminism" while "simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intentioned response to feminism" (McRobbie 255). However, constructions of power in the works leave them inconsistent with post-feminism's recognition that the interrelatedness of various forms of oppression is essential to the fight against sexism and exploitation of all people (hooks 31). O'Neill's texts thus align with some aspects of post-feminism and not others.

The broadened lens of intersectional feminism that facilitates women's diverse experiences and emphasises the non-uniformity of inequality has become central to post-feminist theory today. In "Toward a Critical Perspective of Culture and Self" Dongxiao Qin articulates the necessity of arguing that "while women throughout the world form their identities within patriarchal systems, they do so in different ways due to race, social class, power, ethnicity, sexuality and within local cultures at particular historical moments" (298). As hooks, and Qin, and many other feminist scholars warn, the danger of insisting on gender as the origin of all relations of domination suggests that patriarchal power is at the root of

women's oppression. Qin expands on this by saying that "ideologically, thinking in this direction enables Western women, especially economically privileged women, to suggest that racism and class exploitation are merely the offshoots of patriarchy rather than constitutive of and constituted in a complex matrix of power" (289). O'Neill's works are in danger of presenting this narrow ideological view, and in doing so, they confine an entire culture and society (broadly Western culture in *Only Ever Yours* and specifically Irish society and sporting culture in *Asking For It*) along a dichotomous dimension that entrenches dangerous, distorted conceptions such as man/woman and masculine/feminine.

4. x. *Relevance of Post-Feminism Today*

Women cast as sexually liberated and empowered in music videos and reality-tv programmes in *Only Ever Yours* compare very closely with the contemporary popular cultural narratives of the early 2000s that Angela McRobbie argues were active in "un-doing" feminism by pointing to a "tyrannical regime of feminist puritanism" no longer relevant to the modern world. In deliberately invoking feminism, McRobbie contends, they were relegating it to the past (259). By presenting these narratives within the heightened dystopian setting, however, the layers of meaning and the suffusion of irony that McRobbie acknowledges was evident in the advertising is removed from O'Neill's novel. McRobbie analyses advertisements like the Wonderbra ad of the mid-nineties that provocatively played up to the typical dimensions of "sexist advertising" and re-cast the male gaze by having the model stare appreciatively at her breasts, thus "playing back well-known aspects of feminist media studies, film theory, and semiotics" to its audience (259). Despite *Only Ever Yours* being published a decade after McRobbie's "Post-feminism and popular culture", the novel relates more to its expression of postfeminist anxieties than with the resurgence of feminism that had begun to occur at the time of its publication.

Roxanne Gay's *Bad Feminist,* published the same year as *Only Ever Yours,* 2014,

develops the irony and humour around the complexities and contradictions of contemporary feminism. In 2004, McRobbie analysed the character of Bridget in Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) as drawing together many of the sociological themes of post-feminism. Bridgetis a free, self-sufficient product of modernity; she is free from the "ties of tradition and community for women" but limited by her anxieties about loneliness and the stigma of remaining single (261). In *Bad Feminist*, many of Gay's anxieties and feelings that she worries are contrary to her status as a feminist echo Bridget's, such as wanting a baby, knowing nothing about cars and reading Vogue unironically.

The YA novel *Diary of a Confused Feminist* (2020) blends Gay's *Bad Feminist* with Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Instead of "calories consumed" – the opening entry in Bridget's diary – teenager Kat, who is determined "to be an excellent feminist" (1), opens each entry by recording her "unfeminist thoughts" (27). The novel's humour, constructed around Kat's efforts to remain feminist while navigating dating, periods and the other aspects characteristic to her teenage life, does not undermine its promotion of feminist values. Although the novel could legitimately be accused of utilising feminism for commercial ends, much of its messaging to do with agency, body image, and female friendship uphold feminist ideology. For example, after trying breast enhancing inserts that caused her to bang into things and feel ridiculous and unbalanced, Kat realises that she prefers herself as she is; the reason her breasts are small, Kat realises, is "probably" that she is "a bit better balanced that way" (84).

While McRobbie argues that *Bridget Jones's Diary* and other cultural productions of its era, like the Wonderbra advertisement, repudiated feminism without being anti-feminist, she also emphasises that "relations of power are made and re-made within texts of enjoyment and rituals of relaxation and abandonment" (262). Although *Diary of a Confused Feminist* could certainly be accused of being evasive – in the same way that McRobbie argues *Bridget Jones's Diary* was – about the ongoing existence of gender inequity at its most pernicious

amonggroups subject to other forms of oppression, the novel does not relegate feminism to the past. Instead, it treats feminism as acceptable and necessary despite the level of confusion it causes. The light-hearted treatment of feminism it expresses is not unproblematic, but it is evidence of the growing mainstream popularity of feminism across culture and an indication of how its treatment has changed since O'Neill's texts were written and published.

In a 2020 interview for fairobserver.com, Naomi Wolf says that in the years since *The Beauty Myth*'s publication, girls increasingly position themselves as critical of social norms and cites a recent trip to India as evidence of this happening globally. She describes seeing "hundreds of highly mobilized, organized, determined passionate feminists … not just women from urban areas, but women from rural areas and first-generation women going to college" (qtd. in Mukhopadhyay, 2020). Nevertheless, she maintains that many of the concerns she raised in *The Beauty Myth* remain relevant today. She argues that anorexia and bulimia statistics have not changed and that social media sites, like Instagram, and the increasing accessibility of plastic surgery are a consistent cause for anxiety in many young women and girls. She also acknowledges that "fears around beauty are extending to men and young boys" (qtd. in Mukhopadhyay).

The thread of comedy throughout *Diary of a Confused Feminist* plays off the complexity and confusion surrounding feminist ideology for teenage girls. The novel's protagonist Kat desperately wants to be understood as "woke" and "feminist" and to "smash the patriarchy" (368). However, when the boy she fancies does not send her a "dick-pick" like other boys send other girls she feels saddened (368). Like Emma in *Asking For It*, Kat is a White, middle-class, European girl, but whereas Kat and the other teenage girl characters in Weston's novel reflect Wolf's description of how the challenges facing (mostly Western) girls have changed in the years following *The Beauty Myth*'s publication, Emma and the other teenage girl characters in O'Neill's novel do not.

4. xi. *Fourth and Fifth-Wave Contemporary Feminism*

Recent progression in feminist thought is referred to by many feminists as representing a fourth wave: a wave designed by technology – the tool that has made feminism mainstream. The Internet and social media platforms have allowed women to build a robust online movement and have made feminism so popular that it stands accused, by some, of having become diluted and sold as a brand. Intersectionality – the recognition of nuanced and varied experiences of oppression – first discussed by bell hooks and Kimberlé Crenshaw in the 80s (1984, ix; 1989, 141) – has entered public debate in recent years andis described by some scholars as representing the fifth wave. Intersectionality was evident in responses to second and third-wave feminism and post-feminist theory and writing but hasbecome more mainstream in recent years.

On International Women's Day 2017 (March 8th), the Women's Equality Party launched "FEMINISM 5.0 #5thwave" online, promoting camps for feminists to exchange ideas on how to grow the movement. Citing reasons for this fifth wave, Sophie Walker, leader of the party, states, "feminism is moving into a new, fifth wave, as hard-won freedoms are under attack across the globe, and the prospect of a gender-equal future looks more fragile than ever before. Women are beginning to organise and act, and Feminism 5.0 will give these new activists the tools they need to push forward, contesting elections, winning seats and changing attitudes" (womensequality.org). The related "MeToo" movement that saw stories recounting sexual assault shared on social media is, for the most part, considered to have helped to publicise an understanding of the magnitude of the problem, but it has also been criticised.

At the beginning of 2018, a story published on Babe.net about a woman's coercive sexual encounter with comedian Aziz Ansari sparked many critical articles collectively termed the "#MeToo backlash". Two months before this publication, Rebecca Traister wrote

about feeling the backlash "brewing": "all it will take is one particularly lame allegation – and given the increasing depravity of the charges, the milder stuff looks lamer and lamer, no matter how awful the experience – to turn the tide from deep umbrage on behalf of women to pity for the poor, bullied men" (qtd. in Page, 2017). Some of the more inflammatory headlines in reaction to the Babe.net article include Cathleen Flanagan's "The Humiliation of Aziz Ansari – Allegations against the comedian are proof that women are angry, temporarily powerful—and very, very dangerous" (*The Atlantic*) and Bari Weiss's "Aziz Ansari is Guilty. Of Not Being A Mind Reader" (*The New York Times*). In an open letter published subsequently by *Le Monde,* signed by one hundred French women – including actress Catherine Deneuve and claiming to represent many more – the #MeToo movement was called a "purging wave" that has "led to a climate of totalitarian society" (*LeMonde*, English edition).

Agnes Poirier describes French and Anglo-American feminism as divided in their attitudes to men and sex. She contends, the French argument that "rape is a crime, but trying to seduce someone, even persistently or cackhandedly, is not" is an example of where attitudes differ (*Le Monde*). The "purging wave" described in the letter refers to the current fifth wave of feminism. Because of the media's influence and the mainstreaming of feminism by linking it with celebrity and popular culture, this wave is both championed as progressive and criticised for diluting the feminist cause. Nonetheless, the spread of feminist thought across social media platforms means that more women and girls are accessing feminist thought without necessarily searching for it. Social media platforms have provided an avenue for those seeking to fight sexism and promote equality of the sexes to do so in a much more public way than was previously available. However, the dislocation that social media platforms provide means they often fuel political polarisation.

4. xii. *Conclusion*

By tracking Irish YA fiction's history and development this chapter identifies how,

despite perceptions of O'Neill's works as ground-breaking, many of the issues O'Neill addresses were already being explored in the Irish YA literature tradition. This chapter draws attention to how YA works like O'Neill's that present as feminist and anti-sexist do not receive sufficient critical scrutiny. It was argued that this is because of the growing popularity of social-change-oriented narratives in Irish and international youth literature and the social significance of aspects of popular culture and facets of feminism that promote discussions about gender in totalising terms.

This chapter offers a critique of O'Neill's didactic social criticism and finds that it is biased and distorted. It was argued that O'Neill's ideological emphasis does not reflect the complexities of modern feminism. Theories of intersectional feminism that emphasise the broad variation of how discrimination and privilege operate on social and political identity emphasise the problematic nature of O'Neill's insistence on gender and patriarchy as the origin of all relations of domination. This chapter contends that, despite appearing to interrogate sexism, O'Neill's didactic, reactionary articulation of feminism perpetuates sexist ideology. It was argued that the ways the works associate violence with masculinity necessitates increased critical scrutiny, and misconceptions they perpetuate about the relationship between girls' oppression and dominant media messaging is concerning.

Chapter Two: Louise O'Neill's Works of YA Literature and Feminist Writing

i. Introduction

This chapter uses feminist appropriations of Foucauldian theory to analyse constructions of agency and sexuality in O'Neill's *Only Ever Yours* and *Asking For It* and in the selected Irish and international YA novels. I consider how configurations of masculinity and femininity are conceptualised and negotiated and ask whether traditional gendered norms are expanded and reformulated, or further entrenched. It is argued that the effects and counter-effects of the prevalent intertextual rhetoric with feminist theory in O'Neill's works and their constructed nature serves to weaken the texts, and undermines the straightforward applicability of the experiences of O'Neill's characters with real-life experiences of women and girls. O'Neill's critique, I argue, disregards young people's resilience and agency evident in youth publishing, media discourses and activism. Furthermore, by being so focused on critiquing how Western beauty ideals affect White, middle-class, heterosexual girls considered by others as meeting those ideals, the texts risk reinforcing those expectations and ignoring others' experiences. The other YA texts challenge conventional constructions of femininity and feature girls who resist sexist structures. Comparison with these other texts helps to strengthen my conviction that O'Neill's works valorise female subjectivity singularly within a system of traditional patriarchy, which underestimates the multiple other potentials of the female body, including desire, resistance, and transgression, and, consequently, fails to take into account the benevolent humanity at the heart of the particular branch of political movement she aspires to instruct the reader in, namely feminism.

ii. Foucauldian Theory and Feminism

Writing in the 1980s, Sandra Bartky argued that women were disciplined by "radical and

extensive measures of bodily transformation" resulting in the "inferiorization of women's bodies" (1988, 35). As well as emphasising how women are controlled, Bartky describes a burgeoning mood of resistance in literature and activism that had begun a "critical questioning of the meaning of femininity" (44). Both Monique Deveaux and Lois McNay build on Bartky's recognition of the individual's capacity for resistance to analyse Foucault's "more constitutive understanding of power" in his later work (Deveaux 1994, 228). According to McNay, Foucault's final work on the self represents a "significant shift…individuals are no longer conceived as docile bodies in the grip of an inexorable disciplinary power, but as self- determining agents who are capable of challenging and restricting the structures of domination in modern society" (1992, introduction, loc.83). McNay agrees with Bartky that there are "distinct ways in which the female body is operated upon" but warns that care must be taken not to "elide this distinction into complete separation"; that "the history of the female body is not completely separate from that of the male body" (133). Deveaux argues that Bartky's use of the docile bodies thesis has the "effect of diminishing and delimiting women's subjectivity, at times treating women as robotic receptacles of culture rather than as active agents who are both constructed by, and reflective of, their social and cultural contexts" (224). This criticism applies to the representations of individual autonomy and subjectivity in O'Neill's texts. Despite being fictionalised as living in the twenty-first centuryor the future, O'Neill's women characters do not reflect the sense of empowerment which has characterised feminist studies on power in recent decades. Rather, O'Neill's women characters are diminished and regulated by culturally determined images of femininity and feminine sexuality.

iii. The Disciplined Body in *Only Ever Yours*

Foucault's analysis of modern power as encoded into social habits and bodily practices is apparent in *Only Ever Yours*. The protagonists' social practices and behaviours acquiesce to

the extreme expectations and regulations of the dystopian patriarchal social order. In Foucauldian terms, the "regime of truth" headed by the "Original Father" form the accepted discourse and norms that govern the society in which freida, the novel's protagonist, exists. The eves listen to looped messages from the "Audio Guide to the Rules for Proper female behaviour" by the "Original Father", which remind the eves to be good, agreeable girls who take the "necessary steps for improvement" (53). This system of discipline and surveillance headed by the Father is applied to every minor detail of bodily conduct as the eves apply the expected norms to their everyday lives. Each morning, after "improving" themselves in their cells, by making themselves up with the help of a computerised Personal Stylist Programme, the eves are weighed for their "weekly report" and given medications to stabilise their weight (kcal blockers). The rest of their days consist of Beauty Therapy, Gym and attending various training and lectures from the chastities on activities deemed suitable. In freida's description, their days consist of being "wound up and wound down, like mechanical dolls": "They turn the lamps on, they turn the lamps off. And another day is done" (46).

The propagandist messages from the Father, which make the eves "like sponges, absorbing beauty, becoming more and more lovely" as they dream, are set up to draw a comparison with real-life messaging that girls hear in the media that equate their worth with beauty (4). This is accentuated by how much media in the text bears heavy significance to real-life media. The platform "MyFace" is an apparent reference to Facebook, and reality TV shows "The Carmichaels" and "Your Face or Mine" are recognisable as popular TV shows, "The Kardashians" and – with the same name – "Your Face or Mine". The eves are subject to intense visibility within a system of panoptic patriarchy and, consequently, extreme vulnerability and subjectivity. The eves are always exposed: to the surveillance of the chastities; to the other eves; and to their own image endlessly reflected wherever they go: "there I am. And there. And there. I am imprisoned in these walls" (5). The novel implies that the eves' experiences can be equated with real-life experiences of women and girls rendered

powerless by analogous systems of surveillance in the real world. However, emphasis on cameras and social media in the text suggest that, in many ways, the magnification of the eves' flaws and vulnerabilities has more to do with today's increasingly multi-media obsessed, technology-driven society, and the surveillance and data-mining of powerful institutions, than it has to do with patriarchal beauty ideals. These aspects of the text are analysed in more detail in Chapter Four.

The eves in *Only Ever Yours* symbolise the dehumanised "robotic receptacles of culture" that Monique Deveaux argues women are reduced to if we are to believe Sandra Bartky's contention that women's bodies are more uniquely controlled by cultural messaging than men's and are thus more "docile" (1990, 224). *Only Ever Yours* implies that the kind of surveillance that women are especially vulnerable to is invasive and inescapable. The novel strongly suggests that an overwhelmingly sexist societal gaze operated and overseen by men is evident across popular culture, which powerfully communicates an unachievable idealised female body that forces young girls to see themselves and others in correlation with it.

Women's and girls' relationships with beauty is far more complex today than O'Neill's text communicates. Although the commercial manipulation of increasingly broad concepts of beauty can be disingenuous, big beauty corporations and fashion industries are more inclusive of all-encompassing notions of what constitutes beauty. Nevertheless, Jia Tolentino argues that Naomi Wolf's beauty myth repackaged as the "lifestyle myth" remains relevant to many contemporary women's lives. She says that "beauty work – labelled as 'self-care' to make it sound progressive" shows that women's empowerment still often feels brutally disempowering (87). The eves' gruelling exercise routines in *Only Ever Yours*, for example, resemble popular Barre exercise classes described by Tolentino as "disciplinary rituals": "an hour of surveillance and punishment in a room of mirrors and equipment and routine" (87). Tolentino convincingly argues that women and girls ought to remain wary of "old requirements" being re-branded rather than overthrown. She warns against women

believing that they are feminist because "instead of being counselled by mid-century magazines to spend time and money trying to be more radiant" for their husbands, they can now "counsel one another to do all the same things" but for themselves (81).

Still, the suggestion that all women are shaped by, or adapt to, dominant cultural narratives to do with beauty in the same way, is problematic. By making the eves all effectively the same, O'Neill intimates that all women are subject to the same set of cultural restrictions. Tolentino's criticism stresses that women have historically been more subject to organising their lives and physical practises around the beauty ideal and argues that they continue to be more affected today, albeit in a less straightforward way. However, her criticism acknowledges that men and women are subject to the "lifestyle myth" and, significantly, she recognises the role of accelerated capitalism and individualism in exacerbating practises of oppressive surveillance "chosen" by all people.

iv. Youth Magazines and Media Discourse

In O'Neill's dystopian and realist works, mass media are such influential sites for disseminating dominant ideology that the characters are unaware of it; conditioned by it; maintaining of it, and incapable of overcoming it. The critical perspective on popular magazine discourse in O'Neill's texts – especially *Only Ever Yours* – does not take the evolution of youth publishing for teenage girls from one which focused solely on fashion and beauty-based concerns to one which, today, explores political and social concerns. In *Only Ever Yours*, O'Neill satirises magazines of the era in which the text was written, like *Cosmopolitan*, which encourages low self-esteem and self-scrutiny and promotes questionable representations of femininity and sexuality. *Teen Vogue*'s Twitter headline in 2020, "a little chaos goes a long way", indicates the emphasis now placed on social consciousness and activism in fashion and beauty magazines, and suggests that media is increasingly a cultural site for challenging sexist misrepresentations.

Describing dramatic developments in Irish youth magazines in 2017, *IMAGE* magazine writer Niamh O'Donoghue writes: "Pages packed with dating tips and eye-candy" are "bygone and modern teen publications are now intelligent, female-friendly, self-assuring, and sophisticated tools for young women" (2019). Even in 2014, the year *Only Ever Yours* was published, Irish publications for teenage girls existed that were not as problematicas the representation of magazine culture in *Only Ever Yours* suggests. *KISS* magazine provided "inspiring stories, fashion, and insight into the lives of real Irish women" and was not "false or pretentious" (O' Donoghue). The kind of "media scripts" that the teenage girls in O'Neill's novels find themselves subject to is strikingly different from missy.ie in 2020 – an online magazine for Irish teenagers. For example, teenage author Sophie Coffey writes politically charged opinion pieces on topics ranging from periods to race. Articles about beauty, such as "Social Media has Distorted the Image of Beauty in the 21st Century" (Coffey 2019) indicate a critically analytical approach to beauty ideals. Others inspire empathy and empowerment. Teenage-girl readers experiencing a crisis of body confidence are encouraged to ask themselves whether they are "kind" or "good at history". Teenagers' aptitude to critically engage with culture and the world around them is sorely missing in O'Neill's depiction of realistic Irish teens. In *Asking For It,* O'Neill depicts Irish teenage girls, like the eves, as controlled and reduced by rules for "proper female behaviour" (O'Neill, *Only,* 1). Irish and international teen magazines are increasingly critical of underlying messages in media content and whose interests they serve. In real life, most young adults know how media content differs from the real world and question the media's models for appropriate behaviour and attitudes. Like her characters, O'Neill affords her readers limited space for alternative perspectives. The composition and graphic presentation of O'Neill's texts feed their subject matter in a significantly organised way that direct the reader towards a reading of the texts deemed appropriate or ideal by the author.

v. The Adult-Author, Child-Reader Relationship in O'Neill's Texts

The coherence and immediacy of feminist agenda in the textual and visual organisation of O'Neill's texts give added complexity to the adult-author/child-reader relationship that permeates all literature for the young making her less "hidden" than most adult authors (Nodelman 3). O'Neill's authorial intention to use literature as a systematic reflection of society and societal behaviour is apparent in the overt politicising feminist ideology present in the content (the language, the imagery, the narrative, and the characterisation) and the form (visual and textual configurations of both the texts and their surrounding elements) of her texts. O'Neill employs these semiotic modes beyond the sophistication already inbuilt in the adult-author/child-or young-adult-reader relationship, which continually draws the reader's attention back to the perceived social problem.

vi. "Paratext", "Epitext" and "Peritext"

Paratextual elements – those aspects of the text that frame the main text – work alongside O'Neill's management of content to advance her agenda. The "paratext" as defined by Gerard Genette (5) is the sum of the "peritext" (the surrounding, secondary elements to a body of published work, such as the cover with associated cover art; the title; the front matter – dedication, opening information, foreword; the back matter: end pages, afterword) and the "epitext" (elements such as interviews, publicity announcements, reviews by and addresses to critics, private letters and other authorial and editorial discussions "outside" of the text). Paratextual elements frame main texts and influence their reception and interpretation.The deliberate and conscious way that the "paratext" of O'Neill's body of work is structured to enlarge the meaning and significance of the texts themselves is beyond most authors' concerns.

In O'Neill's works, paratextual intrusions guide our reading of the works – so much that author persona and interpretive authority loom large. The texts' titles and front cover

imagery convey feminist concerns about the link between female idolisation and objectification, and female suffering – particularly those editions that feature doll imagery (a barbie doll's or mannequin's head feature on the cover of *Only Ever Yours* and a barbie doll's legs or the face of a girl who is crying feature on the cover of *Asking For It*). The main title of *Asking For It* is qualified by the following line: "what did she expect?" A question is posed directly to the reader before s/he opens the text indicating how visual, formatting and typography elements are knowingly constructed to shape the reader's engagement. Afterwords, endpapers, and suggestions for further reading communicate expectations for the reader. The afterword to *Asking For It* directly implores the reader to enter into conversation about the topics raised:

> "We need to talk about rape. We need to talk about consent. We need to talk about victim-blaming and slut-shaming and the double standards we place upon our young men and women. We need to talk and talk and talk until the Emmas of this world feel supported and understood. Until they feel like they are believed" (342).

The repetition of the word "talk" and use of the word "we" draw the reader into dialogue with both the narrative of the text and with O'Neill's ideology as publicly disseminated through her activism. The afterword acts as a pressing request for the reader to engage with the subject matter and make meaning from the text in line with O'Neill's vision of what a pertinent, significant reading would be. This demonstrates how consciously paratextual elements are utilised to shape reader responses and reflects their potential to function as a form of literary/social fundamentalism.

The epitext is "any paratextual element not materially appended to the text but … circulating, as it were, freely, in a virtually limitless physical and social space" (Genette 344). Politically minded authors, like O'Neill, increasingly vastly distribute their epitexts via the Internet and social media. This, as well as the other aspects of O'Neill's epitext (her RTE documentary *Asking For It*; her public appearances and speeches; her weekly column in *The Irish Examiner*), make her a more prevalent and influential force on societal consideration of

the issues she writes about in the texts themselves.

Of course, O'Neill does not craft all the paratextual elements – editors, printers, publishers, and designers all play a part – but her authorial agenda is meaningfully evident throughout. *Asking For It*'s endpapers contain Irish and international rape and sexual abuse support services information, and some versions include study questions for consideration, as well as a list of further reading. The list includes Kate Harding's *Asking for It*, Laura Bates's *The Everyday Sexism Project* and other YA novels dealing with rape and sexual abuse. In her introduction to the list, O'Neill describes how she has drawn upon a "variety of different resources" including "fictional and non-fictional" explorations of "rape culture" and emphasises how this proved "essential in creating the world" of the novel (*Asking* 350). Positioning the novel this way may frame it as authentic, but it has a somewhat reductive effect on the reader.

vii. "The Reader in the Book" and "Negotiation of Insight"

Aidan Chambers's concept of "negotiation of insight" in "The Reader in the Book" (1985, 34) sets up meaning as negotiation: Chambers contends that the book contains "potential meanings" waiting to be actualised by the reader. Neil Cocks maintains that by seeking to understand meaning as a negotiation between various parties involved in the reading process, meaning has the potential for expansion beyond being merely a fixed end product of an author's intention or intrinsic quality of the text (2004, 94). In effect, Cocks supports Chambers's argument that the relationship between author and reader should be one in which the author creates a relationship whereby the reader can discover the meaning of the text. Chambers and Cocks base their conjectures on reader-response theory. Reader-response theory aligns with post-structuralist theory, such as Barthes's 'Death of the Author', which seeks to displace the author as an authoritarian figure in the text and see readers construct meaning instead of passively consuming it. Wolfgang Iser, mentioned in

the introduction, is among the foremost theorists of reader-response. Historically, reader-response theory has been understood to occur between the reader and the text, as Chambers and Cocks describe. Context, other texts, background knowledge and other people's responses are all understood to be influential to reader-response too; it is understood that one reader does not read one text in isolation, as it were. Today, however, the nature of technology is changing how readers respond to texts and the author's nature as an authoritarian figure.

In 2003, Moreillon and Tatarchuk described "an explosion of discourse communities in cyberspace" (1). Today, exponential technological advancement has resulted in digital media allowing everyone to be both producers and consumers (Gee and Hayes 2011). Readers can co-construct their understanding of a text by interacting with other readers and, more significantly, with authors in social media spaces. Technological advances allow for participatory responses to texts whereby the reader can watch the author discuss a text or talk to an author online. Other increasingly reader-led responses to texts are prevalent in YA literature – fanfiction, for example. Fanfiction is fiction written by fans of pre-existing works of YA fiction. Now a hugely popular genre with subgenres and fandoms of its own, fanfiction is an example of the kind of creative manifestations of reader-response theory that the Internet and social media facilitate today. Paradoxically, the Internet and social media set up the author as a focal point, as an authoritarian figure influential to texts' reception and reader responses. How this relates to the way O'Neill's texts are received and to how readers might respond to them is one of this dissertation's key concerns.

As texts, O'Neill's novels provide the reader with limited space for interpretation, and the discussion of her work in the media and social media spaces further limits the "potential meanings" for readers that Chambers describes. In *Only Ever Yours*, freida's experiences with advertising and media reference real-life versions that present the reader with the chance to collude with the author to make the "real" meaning: that these dystopian versions

of everyday experiences of contemporary media are not that far removed from reality; that the pressure on the eves is very similar to the pressure on young women in today's culture. On its own, the novel leaves room for "negotiation of insight"; however, if a reader then engages with O'Neill's discussion of the text (on TV, in newspaper articles, podcasts, etc.) this is likely to influence their reader-response. Furthermore, discussion points for reading groups and books clubs included in some versions of *Asking For It* could shape the reader's interpretation of the text. Paratextual elements such as the afterword communicate a previously established, clearly defined "correct" meaning before the reader engages with the text. For the most part, the questions work to emphasise the existence of "rape culture" and interrogate how deeply systemic sexism is in Irish society. Only one discussion point asks the reader to consider the authenticity of the work's social criticism: "Emma's rapists were shown great compassion by the priest at mass. Did that surprise you? Do you find such an incident convincing?" (349). Authorial control is further evident in the form and content of O'Neill's texts.

viii. Form and Content; Intertextuality and Typographical Play

Several devices, including intertextuality and typographical play, are employed to convey particular meanings within the texts. Mirror imagery communicates the notion that women see themselves first and foremost as subjects. This imagery correlates with Simone De Beauvoir's contention in *The Second Sex* that women have never been defined by themselves as women, but always only in relation to men, by men (16-23). In *Only Ever Yours* mirrors and screens reflecting the eves' image surround them. freida's cell is "a small house made of mirrors, every surface papered in glass" (4). On the first page of the novel, freida refers to mirrors as "the mirrors" (3). Qualifying mirrors in this way – almost as another character in the text – instantly sets out the vital role they play in the text and pushes the reader to interpret recurring mirror imagery semiotically. Although a young reader may not be aware

of the feminist theory, they are likely to have his/her attention drawn to the trope of the mirror because of its repetition.

O'Neill employs a similar technique in *Asking For It*. The novel opens with Emma and her mother looking in the mirror. Emma's mother's face is made up with "bright red lips on powdered skin" whilst Emma's face is "flushed" with "patches of red breaking out" on her cheeks (3). Framing mother and daughter in the mirror communicates how their image confines them. It immediately alerts the reader to the importance of physical beauty and female comparison and competition in the text. Every moment of Emma and her mother's interaction centres on beauty as a destructive objectifying force. Emma's mother works hard to maintain her beauty: "Karren Hennessy gets her hair blow-dried three times a week" (3); Emma is beautiful like her mother: people always say that she is "the image of her" (3).

Nonetheless, they are jealous of each other and it is made evident throughout the text that they are both "ugly" beneath their surfaces by how cruel they are to each other. Emma's mother's habitual comment, "you look beautiful this morning Emmie, as always" is undermined by needling digs threaded through the narrative and the dialogue. The tense atmosphere and the overt mirror imagery call to mind the extreme fairy-tale relationship between Snow White and her wicked stepmother in the nineteenth-century canonical "Little Snow White", as told by the Brothers Grimm, which explores similar themes of beauty and power. It works to draw attention to how the tale has been retold and continues to be retold today. The text establishes beauty as the locus of female power: all women – even a mother and daughter – are subject to anxieties about their image, about ageing, and are, as a result, set against each other as sexual rivals. This compound the message for the reader that says women are subject to the scrutiny of a gaze that objectifies and subjugates them – in the case of *Only Ever Yours* this is the patriarchal gaze of The Father, in *Asking For It*, it is the matriarchal gaze of Emma's mother. Nevertheless, its over-use becomes oppressive.

Similar to her approach to intertextuality, O'Neill asks the reader to interact with

typography on a semiotic level. One of the most prominent examples of this was already referred to concerning the presence of "the author": how female characters and female groupings are all given lowercase letters in *Only Ever Yours*: freida, isabel, chastities, eves. The jarring effect of this typographical choice reminds the reader about the different status of men and women in the text, especially when a female name appears with an initial lower case letter alongside a male name with an initial upper-case letter. In a sentence where both men and the school's institution are given more importance than women it has an even more deliberately destabilising effect: "Really, ruth, has the benchmark for beauty at the School fallen so low? She's been unwell Judge Goldsmith" (345). The reader is likely to notice and re-notice this throughout the text and compare how this doesn't happen in the real world in the same way. This disparity heavily stresses the authorial conviction that these aspects of the real world do in fact have more significance and are, in part, responsible for the oppression of women. In the above quote, the name Judge Goldsmith is likely an intentional reference to the British attorney general, Lord Goldsmith who, in 2007, asked for an appeal for a man convicted of raping a ten-year-old girl by referencing the girl's "provocative clothing" and the fact that she looked older than her years (qtd. in Moore). These very close,very direct, links to the real world further emphasise O'Neill's efforts to critique how the interplay between power and beauty in contemporary society is particularly damaging to women and girls.

Real-world TV programmes referenced in *Only Ever Yours* flatly fail to consider how men are often judged on looks in a very similar way to women in many of these shows. For example, "Your Face or Mine" referred to in *Only Ever Yours*, is a British TV show where couples have to choose who they think is the most attractive of the two random individuals' pictures they see. If their choice is consistent with the audiences', they win the money prize. In O'Neill's manifestation, only women's faces are shown. In the real-life TV version, men and women are shown, and both are objectified and scrutinised in the same manner. This

validates my contention that O'Neill's works fail to consider men as affected by idealised constructions of masculinity in the media. The works do not fully consider women's role in constructing and maintaining idealised and stereotypical masculinities that have damaging consequences for the men and boys trying to achieve them.

In *Only Ever Yours*, typography methodically contributes to the reader's comprehension of satire about hysteria – derived from the Greek word for the uterusand originally conceived as an exclusively female complaint – that is central to the text. freida and the other eves' receive propagandised instructions about acceptable female behaviour at "Organized Recreation", a daily class "devised to combat female hysteria syndrome: any hysterical, over-emotional girl behaviour" (43). freida's italicised thoughts cutthrough the narrative and draw attention to how she internalises societal expectations about acceptable behaviour. The lines, "*my thighs are too big, my hair is too messy, I hate myself, I hate myself*" create an immediacy of insight into her strained emotional state (283). Rather than develop and feed the narrative voice, these authorial intrusions disrupt the narrative and remind the reader what the author is satirising: the notion that "female emotion" is still considered harmful in contemporary society and contributes to female submissiveness.

Throughout the final chapters, the italicised sections act as periodic forewarnings about freida's final state at the end of the novel, "ready to feel nothing, forever" (390). The italicised sections in the text track her journey from repeating these continued instructions to herself to keeping herself in line with societal expectation – "Nice girls don't get angry" (235) – to giving in to the system entirely when she cannot feel anything anymore – "I should feel embarrassed… I should feel guilty … I should feel worried" (363). freida's recitations in preparation to become a chastity are set out alone on a single page, further illustrating the prominence given to language that directly correlates with images of female subjectivity. Presenting freida's inner thoughts as a poem with the repeated refrain "I must", provides the reader with a pause to assimilate the meaning and auditory reverberation to provide

emphasis:

> "As a chastity, I must be selfless.
> As a chastity, I must be modest…
> As a chastity I must sacrifice.
> As a chastity I must surrender" (371).

After days of these recitations, the internal monologue seeps into freida's mind and interrupts her narration in the same way that we saw before when she looked at her reflection: "today they shaved my head. Today they ripped my useless womb out and I am empty, so empty. *As a chastity, I must sacrifice*"(380/1). These typographic elements compel the reader to consider how similar messages might affect them – or women more broadly – in contemporary society.

To suggest, as O'Neill's texts do, that all women are objects and that men universally benefit from a system of power unfairly balanced in their favour, and want to keep it that way, is dangerous. It denies the possibility that men and women can function as partners and sharply disfigures gender identity in line with an overly simplified notion of power. Placing men at the centre of a system of power and surveillance – as the watchers – and women as on the edges of the system – as the watched – denies the potential of both women and men to be both objects of a disciplinary gaze as well as active participants in the surveillance of others – as is the case in the real world. Following the line of thought that men subject women and consequently, women subject themselves through learned oppression, leaves no space for the possibility that women subject men or the broad spectrum of how power operates. Furthermore, the implications for the reader of wholly denying girl characters the capacities of resistance and opportunities for empowerment are unsettling.

ix. Acts of Resistance in *Only Ever Yours* and *Asking For It*

Regarding surveillance technologies in contemporary society, like CCTV, Majid Yar argues that Foucault's conception of "visuality-as-domination might fail to take proper cognisance

of the polyvalent and complex character of visual experience" (2003, 267). He finds that since the "panoptic logic rests in a crucial respect upon the subject actively investing in it with authority, it may be more fragile and reversible than is commonly allowed" (267). This fragility and reversibility, Yar contends, "creates at least the *possibility* for subversion and resistance" (267). Such possibilities are all the more likely within the context of post-feminism, which is central to O'Neill's works. Nevertheless, although O'Neill's protagonists exist in post-feminist – and even, in *Only Ever Yours*, post-human – contexts, they are not afforded this complexity of character.

Sara K. Day notes that many YA dystopian novels situate adolescent girls as especially vulnerable to cultural claims and expectations about their bodies and highlight how a "focus on superficial elements may render citizens docile" (2014, 77). Nevertheless, Day argues, many YA dystopian novels feature girl protagonists whose "newfound sexual confidence correspond with a newfound willingness to seek justice for herself and those around her" (89). Despite evidence that suggests Emma and freida have powerful aspects to their characters, neither experience any such sexual awakening. Emma is intelligent and aware of the power of her beauty, yet so submissive that she accepts the reductive way that boys treat girls in the novel. Emma's confidence in her relationships with her female friends, her criticism of older women, and her mostly enjoyable relationship of mutual respect with Conor suggest she would be more sexually empowered than she is portrayed to be. Unlike other eves, freida has the strength to question the contradictory messages the eves receive about appropriate sexual conduct; she is "fed up" with the "ambiguity" of understanding that while she can never say "no", she must also know when to say "no" to avoid being a "whore" (220).

Despite being illiterate and denied educational opportunities beyond subjects deemed appropriate for eves (cooking, sex, etiquette, grooming), freida is intelligent, inquisitive and eager to learn. Darwin describes talking with her as "almost like talking to a man"; she

watches the nature channel; and, to her ultimate undoing, she understands her situation's injustices. These agential aspects of their identity not withstanding, both protagonists' agency is limited intheir relationships with the boys they romantically desire. freida's awareness of the paradoxesand contradictions in the dominant messaging she receives about "how to be an eve" – which translate to comment on real-life messaging in contemporary society about "how to be a girl" gives her more complexity of character than Emma. Emma's every agential qualityexpresses the effect of patriarchal domination on her character. Still, freida's critical capacities that allow her to interrogate her subjugation do not result in freedom; at the end ofthe novel, she is physically and mentally beaten. freida enjoys her sexual experiences with Darwin, but her emotional capacity for love is drained by the "years of chastity-training" blasting "sirens" like a "broken fire alarm" in her head and her fractured relationship with isabel, which has "sucked" her "heart dry" (319). isabel, whose physical rebellion is ultimately a form of self-harm and destruction rather than an act of self-preservation and insurgency, ultimately commits suicide.

Although readers are unlikely to think freida a progressive protagonist, she might incite a feminist reaction. The novel's ending demonstrates a resistant feminist perspective by presenting the protagonist's weakened position and resolutely exhibiting men's role in subjugating her. However, had the aspects of freida's and isabel's characters that see them resist impingements on their agency not resulted in such an entire obliteration of their identities the novel might have better complicated and interrogated their subjectivities. Had this been the case, their position as postfeminist protagonists might more credibly align with real-life women and girls' lives – which, arguably, would present the reader with a fuller and more progressive, resistant feminist perspective.

x. Acts of Resistance in International YA Literature

Isabel Quintero's *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*, published in America in 2014, and Helen Barnes's *Killing Aurora*, published in 1999 in Australia, convey a sense of injustice regarding

differences in gendered social expectations and values. Like O'Neill's novels, these two texts alert girl readers to examine their bodily conduct and disciplinary routines to expose them as ludicrous and often damaging. The most significant difference between O'Neill's novels and these two novels is how the central and background characters are represented as conscious or unconscious of the hypocrisy at work in the sexist structures and conservative attitudes surrounding them.

Asking For It depicts its central character, Emma, and most others as complicit with the beauty myth and "rape culture" (examined in greater detail in Chapter Three). Quintero's approach is less uncompromising. Gabi undermines sexist attitudes about how girls ought to behave through her poetry and her actions, and manages to remain autonomous, sexually assertive, mostly body-confident, and influential enough to alter the attitudes of some of those around her. Mirrors function in *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* in a similar way to O'Neill's novels. They illustrate Gabi's experience of feeling pressured to conform to conventional beauty ideals. Her mother pushes her to diet and comments on other girls' need to improve their looks to get a man, "now imagine if she lost a little weight and took more care of herself, how many more boys would like her" (loc. 1383). Nonetheless, Gabi is not wholly the product of these influences; she is aware that her self-worth comes from more than her body and looks. When Gabi looks in the mirror and comments that it is sometimes her enemy – "I would never dare ask it who is the fairest of them all because I know the response would make me weep" – the implication is that women and girls are affected by the culture of storytelling and cultural narratives that promote unattainable and damaging beauty ideals. Her next thought, "but, sometimes I feel okay about it and even think, *I'd tap that, why not?*", illustrates her ability to overcome these influences (loc. 2476). When Martin asks her to go running, she is worried about her "goodies and bits and pieces…bouncing up and down for the whole world to see" but equally anxious about Martin thinking her "superficial" (loc. 1882). She has the wherewithal to think "no one is going to be looking at your goodies…and

if they are, so what? Focus on your goal and go getting" (loc. 1882). Significantly, Gabi's sense of her attractiveness is not derived from an acceptance that someone else, for example, Martin, could find her desirable; she perceives herself as attractive. In her examination of girl protagonists in dystopian YA fiction, Sara K. Day found that the girls' sexual confidence and body acceptance often came from boys and that their rebellious tendencies were influenced by first seeing boys challenge the system (2016). Gabi's rebelliousness comes from within herself.

Gabi's self-talk connects more with the kind of positive affirmations in missy.ie – the Irish teen magazine referred to earlier. Quintero subverts the mirror as an inherently insidious tool for negative self-surveillance and scrutiny empowering Gabi – and the girl reader – in a manner like that promoted in "body positivity" and "self-love" discourses. "Anti-ideal woman" and "anti-Instagram" posts on social media sites, such as those that show the difference between reality and heavily photoshopped images, have become popularised and are often laughingly disingenuous. Nevertheless, they do go some way towards destabilizing dominant messaging about beauty expectations. Although influencers posting pictures of their stretch marks or belly fat creasing, while also conforming to a beauty ideal that most women would perceive as wildly unachievable is hardly radical resistance, it is evidence that "real" is becoming popular.

In *Killing Aurora* Helen Barnes explores the relationship between cultural emphasis on female idealisation and women's relationships with their bodies:

> "It was at primary school, everybody was eleven years old. There was a girl called Sally running across the handball courts. A boy called Wayne shouted at her 'Fuck your arse wobbles Welsh!' Sally stopped and sat heavily on the steps, she didn't answer back or hit Wayne or even pinch him and she used to be a sick pincher. What she did was sit on the steps and dissolve like sugar in the rain. Web couldn't believe it. Sally was disappearing before her eyes"
>
> (n.p. audio)

In the above extract and subsequent scene, Barnes offers a compelling depiction of

protagonist Web's confrontation with the challenges that are characteristic to a pre-teen. Fourteen-year-old outcast Web is disgusted by the rigorous standards of femininity that other girls adhere to – in particular, Aurora, the novel's other main character who suffers from anorexia in an effort to be accepted by her peers. Web's developing identity is thrown off course by a growing awareness of the self and others as defined by social, specifically gendered, categorisation rather than individuality. Most impressive is the degree of nuance with which Barnes depicts the progression of Web's opinion of her peers and the gradation with which this understanding develops her character throughout the novel.

In the section of the text that follows the above quotation, Web's act of solidarity with Sally: hitting Wayne, goes unnoticed, leaving Web confused and disappointed. The other girls make no effort at confronting Wayne either. Instead, they turn inward towards self-abasement, coalescing around Sally and cooing "you're not overweight at all Sally. Honest, I wish I had a figure like yours, look how fat I am". Sally's swift fall from a physically adept and courageous girl worthy of Web's admiration, a "sick pincher", to a girl whose reserve "dissolves like sugar in the rain" following Wayne's comment about her physical flesh wobbling during activity (something it should rightfully do), speaks to the fragility of young teenagers' perception of their developing bodies. Of further significance for the intended reader, though, is Web's disappointment in this sudden change in Sally. Web's revelation that there is "something wrong" with girls after seeing Sally "disappearing before her eyes" goes beyond a one-dimensional eye-opener for the intended reader about the ramifications of bodily objectification for teenage girls. Web's awareness develops beyond understanding that the boys' conduct towards the girls is wrong to a more profound self-consciousness about the estimation the girls have of themselves. This delicately balanced depiction deepens the meaning of the statement that there is "something wrong with girls". It communicates to the intended reader that judging people based on belonging to a group – and by the terms and qualifications associated with proper status within that group – rather than as individuals, is

detrimental to all humans. The complexity of Barnes's treatment of teenage experience in the text is a worthy representation of the intricacies and ambiguities of contemporary understanding of adolescence.

xi. Cultural Authenticity and Social Commentary

Laura M. Robinson argues that relating myths about gender to young readers might teach them to recognise and resist conformity to dominant contemporary gender norms, but might also serve to re-entrench the stereotype that they wish to debunk. She uses the example of two non-fiction YA texts, *Girlness: Deal with it Body and Soul* and *Guyness: Deal with it Body and Soul*. One myth is "guys are not as sensitive as girls" (4). "If the reader has never before encountered these myths", Robinson argues, "he or she is, in this moment, learning them" – something she describes as an "unnerving conundrum" (4). O'Neill's texts are similarly unsettling. The heavy-handed approach to revealing girls' passivity as an artifice of social construction might not have the intended effect. Rather than emancipate the reader from gender conformity by opening his/her eyes to gender conventions, the texts might reinforce current norms. Girl readers might examine themselves as absolutely gendered and consequently confined, and see others in similarly reduced absoluteness.

By prioritising individuals' characterisation limited by traditional and regressive gender roles, over those who reject or reimagine them, O'Neill's texts are in danger of reflecting a skewed version of Irish girls' lives. Because O'Neill's *Asking For It* does not engage with the increasingly egalitarian, individualist culture evident in Ireland at the time of its setting (2015), in which male/female gendered roles were becoming less clearly defined and approaches to gender more flexible, it fails to perform as effective contemporary social criticism. Siobhan Dowd's *A Swift Pure Cry* – published in 2006 and set in 1984 – and Moira Fowley-Doyle's *All The Bad Apples* (2019) – published four years after *Asking For It* – offer a different approach to social commentary.

The small-town, parochial nature of some writing in *Asking For It* does not seem authentically applicable to contemporary Irish society. Many aspects of characterisation could be more plausibly situated in the Ireland of decades earlier, and others, emphasised by the significant rate of change concerning attitudes to women's rights and equality in Ireland in the years since its publication, seem particularly regressive – or, at the least, omissive of progress. The text overwhelmingly establishes regressive, sexist attitudes to women as fixed in the society within which Emma is growing up. Hints of broadminded background characters do little to counter them. Like Emma's parents, older main characters embody gendered stereotypes: her father is a bank manager; her mother's main activity is baking. Emma's mother, Nora, is particularly subject to cultural expectations about appearance and appropriate feminine behaviour. She uses a "special" voice around Dennis, Emma's father, and regularly comments on how Emma should present her body: "You need to watch your posture, pet" (5). Emma's father calls Emma "my princess" (50). While affectionate, naming his daughter in this way suggests a duality that is similarly evident in Nora's treatment of Emma: pride in her beauty and anxiety about her burgeoning sexuality. After Emma's sexual assault, her parents are so ashamed that they are relieved when Emma decides not to take the case to court. Emma's parents emphasise the endurance of traditionalist, regressive attitudes in contemporary Ireland. However, by making them the central representation of their generation in the novel, O'Neill does not just acknowledge that such attitudes and behaviours still exist today. She immortalises an out-dated depiction of an entire generation and overemphasises their contemporary influence.

A Swift Pure Cry, inspired by actual events in Irish history (the case of the Kerry babies and the death of Anne Lovett), deconstructs social and cultural institutions that enabled the control of women in Ireland at the time: the family, school, and, in particular, the Catholic church and the power it wielded over young women. The text made events in the past relevant to women's reproductive rights and issues still being contested. However, the

text clarifies that Shell is limited and defined not just by gender but also by bereavement and poverty. Narrative accounts of Shell's never being missed at school, having to steal her first bra, and having to go to the travelling library to seek out information about pregnancy are set alongside subtle details of neglect: "her toothbrush with its splayed old bristles" (144), making it clear that her social and economic status are central to her oppression. As Pádraic Whyte points out, the text offers another expanse in its representation of neglect and abuse: "the text is not specifically about physical or sexual abuse, it is about the failure of adults to protect children" ("Young Adult" 148).

xii. Ireland as a Patriarchal Society in O'Neill's Texts

O'Neill presents Ireland and the Irish people as subject to the fact that we all have an inner patriarchy: "Within each of us lives an inner Patriarch that continues to carry the old patriarchal rules and values" (Stone 1). bell hooks's contention that "patriarchy has no gender" reframes gender inequality as an issue for everyone. In contrast, O'Neill maintains that disparity in status, power and prestige between men and women is effected and preserved by men wittingly and lastingly, excluding them from both the ill effects of gender inequality and the want to effect change. Her representation of patriarchy omits a consideration of other organisational and cultural narratives of oppression, such as class explored in Dowd's novel – so focused is it on male acts of domination.

Moira Fowley-Doyle's *All The Bad Apples* tells the story of Deena, who is treated as a "bad apple" by her father because she is gay. When Deena's sister Mandy disappears, Deena believes that she, Mandy, and generations of other women in her family have been similarly cursed. She begins a journey that sees her encounter witches and banshees, discover the truth behind her father's homophobia (his own experience in a Catholic industrial school) and, ultimately, realise that "the curse isn't" on "her family … It's on every woman in this country" (328). *All The Bad Apples* sets up patriarchal influence as specific to the Rys family

rather than as social commentary on wider Irish society as a whole: "it didn't matter that times had changed. In our family so many things remained the same" (153). The chasm between Deena's father's attitude and those of her peers is illustrated by Deena's description of her father and by her niece Ida's response:

> "'Like … my dad. He's very … traditional. Very religious, conservative. He still believes that a woman's place is truly in the home. Which is actually backed up by our constitution, you know, so he clearly isn't alone.
> Ida rolled her eyes. 'Yeah, but nobody *actually* thinks that any more'
> 'You'd be surprised.'
> Ida said, 'Denna, if your family is like that, *they* sound like the bad fucking apples, not you'" (105).

This is further developed in a later scene in which Deena realises that her being gay does not make her "bad", but rather that it is her father's reaction to it that is wrong. Cale remarks that there are "places where you kind of almost remember how it used to be. Before us, I mean. When there were no roads or people or telephones". Ida says, "it's because, in places like this, nothing's really changed" (172). Deena's response, "we've changed" indicates her capacity for transformation as well as, more broadly, the capacity within Ireland for the revision of regressive attitudes.

In Patricia Kennon's praise of contemporary Irish women writers who succeed in expressing a "devoted, explicit sense of Irishness" whilst confronting and re-inscribing problematic aspects of Ireland's past in a manner that is unwavering but not uncompromising, Louise O'Neill's name is notably absent (2020, 138). She emphasises how Fowley-Doyle's *All The Bad Apples* – despite being "fiery" and nearing the"polemical at times" – presents young people with the potential to effect change and healingat an individual and collective level (138). I agree with Kennon's observation. Far more than O'Neill's novels, Fowley-Doyle's *All The Bad Apples* offers an antidote to gendered, sexist hierarchies and emphasises an openness to alternative ways of thinking and living.

Fowley Doyle, like Deirdre Sullivan and Sarah Maria Griffin – whose novels are examined in detail in subsequent chapters – are committed to challenging and defying "the

elision of Irish girls, women, and Irish writing" and present Irish identity in diverse ways by challenging heteronormativity and confronting sexuality. (Kennon 132). Where O'Neill's works focus on the notion that Ireland and the Irish are wholly enslaved by patriarchal cultural constraints, Fowley-Doyle's text manage to render Ireland at once modernised and traditional, progressive and stilted. Nevertheless, these other works are not entirely unproblematic. In Chapter Four, I examine some questionable depictions of men in the texts, and consider how the heavy presence of paratextual authorial voice in the works shape the lens through which the reader views the text.

Patricia Kennon recognises Peadar Ó Guilín's horror duology *The Call* (2017) and *The Invasion* (2018) as notable exceptions of YA works by Irish men authors which "recognise the empowering importance of female relationships and present multiple young female characters with complexity, vulnerability and agency" (133). Considering other recent Irish YA works by men authors, Kennon argues few, despite them involving many female protagonists, are "explicitly feminist or even pass the Bechdel test (a measure of representation of girls and women in cultural works examining whether the worksfeature at least two named women who talk to each other about something other than a man)" (133). How male characters in the works authored by women measure up against the categories set out by Kennon, in accordance with the Bechdel test, is not given any consideration. The extent to which many of these explicitly feminist works recognise the empowering importance of male relationships and present multiple young male characters with "complexity, vulnerability and agency" is not asked; nor are any facets of this explicit feminist literature interrogated as having any parallels to modern feminist rhetoric that crosses the line from attacks on sexism into attacks on men; that overemphasises individual behaviour as reflective of a collective; oversimplifies the binary of women as oppressed and men as oppressor; or acknowledges that men can and often do feel objectified and scrutinised. Although the Bechdel test is useful for gauging a measure of

balanced gender representation in cultural works, it's "one size fits all" model should be recognised as problematic. Playwright Samantha Ellis's adaptation of the test for stage, the *Sphinx Test*, asks questions beyond just who talks to who and how often, such as "Are women characters active or reactive?", and "If a play is funny, do the women characters have any funny lines?"("Why the Bechdel", 2016). She argues that two women characters having a conversation about men need not be un-feminist, just as two women characters having a conversation that is notabout men does not necessarily mean that they have agency. Ellis's adaptation of the test demonstrates how the application of any such model should be used as a springboard for further interrogation of not only gender-based inequities in cultural works, such as representation and content, but also of the potential fickleness that procedures around the classification of something as feminist can have, indicating that some do more to further gender antagonism than equality.

xiii. Conclusion

"To lead a life soaked in the passionate consciousness of one's gender at every moment, to will to be a sex with a vengeance – impossibilities, and far from the aims of feminism"
(Riley 1987, 38)

This chapter argued that O'Neill constructs characters with a collectivity that leaves little room for various individual identities. Women characters are limited to a category of socially produced femininity that is never a source of power but an effect of patriarchal, corrosive conditioning. Characters arranged in sexed ranks as "women" and as "men" make the reader passionately conscious of sex and gender in a way that Denise Riley says is impossible. As Riley argues, in real-life identities fluctuate: "Being a woman has differing periodicities which are not only phenomenological, played out moment by moment for the individual, but are also historical – collectivities and characterisations of 'women' are established in a myriad historical-discursive formations" (38). Analysis of how O'Neill uses intertextuality and typographical play in this chapter showed that by over-emphasising how disciplines of

power operate differently on women's bodies; her texts present the reader with a one-sided portrayal of power relations and too greatly polarise the experiences of women and men. Efforts to undermine feminine beauty ideals and deny women's natural disposition as passive were shown to be vastly disproportionate with any that challenge ideals of masculinity. This chapter argued that O'Neill's literary works suffer under the weight of her agenda to challenge the idea that Ireland is a gender-equal country, and, more broadly, the perception that contemporary Western societies no longer require feminism – to the extent that they often perpetuate, albeit possibly unintentionally, divisive hegemonic notions of gender binaries. This chapter argued that O'Neill's depiction of Irish society in *Asking For It*, in which men hold power over women and can inhibit them from doing what they want, offers a problematic and unrealistic reflection of contemporary Irish society at the time of the text's setting and now.

Chapter Three: Liberating or Limiting?
"Rape Culture" and Consent in *Asking For It*

"Irish women have a history of being told to stay quiet; we were supposed to be good girls and smile as they cut out our tongues"

(O'Neill "When I Look")

i. Introduction

O'Neill uses the eves' experiences in *Only Ever Yours* as a lens to explore the effect of modern Western middle-class society on the female psyche and body image. In *Asking For It*, O'Neill similarly offers commentary on the commodification and objectification of the female body but turns her attention to contemporary Irish society by holding it accountable for facilitating what she presents as a culture of rape, within which sexism and violence against women is normalised, and misogyny is internalised.

Emma's experience in *Asking For It* is set against a background of institutions – family, law, sport, religion, and the media – all of which perpetuate a culture of rape. This is shown through the novel's frequent references to cultural items, such as video games like "Grand Theft Auto", porn, and FHM posters that depict demoralising and often violent images of objectified women, as well as in the comments and actions of background characters. For instance, men are frequently described as "dragging" and "grabbing" women as well as looking them "up and down" (34/50), while women have obsessive and unhealthy relationships with food and self-image. In the novel, the boys who sexually assault Emma and post the abuse on social media gain the most sympathy in the media. All of this contributes to depicting the social environment Emma is growing up in as one in which prevailing attitudes and behaviours have the effect of trivialising or normalising rape and sexual abuse. Women's identities are constructed, compromised and maintained in relation to society's idealised concept of femininity – the standards of which are painfully unattainable

and laden with hypocrisy, particularly concerning how women behave sexually. This includes Emma and important role models like her mother and her peers and background women characters. In this way, *Asking For It* is as much a study of constructed femininity as it is a novel "about rape" – although this is not how it has been marketed or discussed by its readers or by O'Neill. This chapter examines O'Neill's totalising classification of broad, complex categories, such as porn, as objectifying and violent. It is argued that *Asking For It* offers overly simplistic conceptualisations of teenagers within which girls' sexuality makes them both dangerous and vulnerable, and boys' sexuality is so inherently violent as to constitute a major social problem.

"Rape culture" as a term has evolved from a faction of radical 1970's feminism to a state policy in the United States, whereby – as John Brigham describes it, "in police departments, in prosecutors' offices and on college campuses", "the idea that systemic rape underlies male privilege has become orthodoxy" (2015, 1). Internationally, this has had implications for policy developments and the treatment of rape claims – many of which have been positive. Subsequently, discussions across Irish media platforms challenging the power systems underpinning Irish state and society have facilitated the dissemination of concerns around the relationship between patriarchal structures of inequality and sexual assault and rape issues. Social media has been an energising force behind important international political activism that raises awareness about rape and acts of sexual violence and calls for better treatment of the individuals affected. However, as Phipps et al. point out social media also plays a central role in developing populist discourse around "rape culture", and in such discourse, there is a "tendency to essentialise the male body as violence" (6). In "performative" social media spaces, a "dynamic often emerges in which outrage at sexism and 'misogyny' can displace analysis of masculinity in all its facets" (Phipps et al., 6). This chapter examines O'Neill's instrumental role in popularising such discourse about "rape culture" in Ireland. Theorising rape on a continuum of inevitable violence expounds on the

problematic notion that women are "pre-constituted victims" (Henderson 226), highlighting a need for a deeper analysis of the nuances of oppression and a continued need for critical examination of the forces involved in sexual violence.

To contextualise O'Neill's texts within the more established American YA tradition of dealing with similar concerns, I draw upon Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* and Isabel Quintero's *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces* in this chapter. The texts are examined concerning how they both bolster and deconstruct certain aspects of perceived "rape culture". Published sixteen years before O'Neill's *Asking For It*, Halse Anderson's *Speak* similarly promotes necessary conversation and education around sexual violence and consent. Like *Asking For It, Speak* succeeds in deconstructing certain cultural myths surrounding rape – many of which O'Neill builds upon in *Asking For It* to call attention to the flawed and outdated nature of rape legislation. Both texts depict complex portrayals of rape. However, significant problems exist. Katy Lewis's critique of *Speak* argues that aspects of the novel create a "disconnect between what the text intends its audience to critically examine and what the text perpetuates" (11). I argue that this is also the case with *Asking For It*.

Quintero's *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces*, published in 2014, offers more contemporaneity with O'Neill's *Asking For It*. Differences in how female and male characters are depicted in the two American texts emphasises the gap of fifteen years between their publications. The more recent American text, *Gabi*, offers more nuance than *Speak* and *Asking For It*, because it touches on how the "rape culture" it depicts promotes traditional male roles that limit men. Quintero presents boys as vulnerable to ideologies about rape and to the ideals that repress them. Quintero explores "rape culture" more critically than O'Neill. Using Quintero's protagonist Gabi as a counterpoint to O'Neill's Emma opens up important questions about authorial agenda explored more broadly in this dissertation, such as how *Asking For It* serves O'Neill's larger polemic about sexual politics.

As part of the Irish National theatre's production of *Asking For It*, the theatre

partnered with six secondary schools to deliver pre-and post-show workshops on the play. This chapter argues that Maedhbh McHugh's play script (2018) develops the boys' characters and touches on intersectional social inequality more than the novel. Consequently, the play provides a broader consideration of influential factors in young people's sexual experiences and consent practices. Nevertheless, both the novel and the play adaptation miss opportunities to explore the complexities of sexual consent fully. *Asking For It* diminishes the variability of young people's sexual agency and their perceptions of sexual boundaries, undermining the model of sexual equity it purports to advocate.

ii. Debates on the Subject of "Rape Culture"

The boys' behaviour in *Asking For It* is "laddish" or symptomatic of "lad culture". A 2012 National Union of Students in the UK report describes "lad culture" as a "group or pack mentality residing in activities such as sport and heavy alcohol consumption and 'banter' which is sexist, misogynistic, or homophobic" (Townsend, unihealth.uk). Alison Phipps (2016) and Kitty Nichols (2018) recognise the term "lad culture" as particularly unnuanced – like the term "rapeculture" – and advocate for a theoretical reframing around such terms that would include increased intersectional analysis, most specifically concerning class and race. According to Phipps, "outrage" around "lad culture" and "rape culture" tends to disregard how intersectional relationships between gender, class privilege and Whiteness produce contemporary "laddish" behaviours (815). Nichols examines how everyday sexism and sexist banter can be conceptualised as having less to do with notions of an "unreflexive lad culture" and more do to with "mischievous masculinities". By "mischievous masculinities", Nichols means men using rude or sexist language with light-hearted intent and a consciousness of its problematic connotations without promoting non-consensual touch (73). Although Phipps and Nichols are concerned with how such "mischievous masculinities" might contribute to creating a prejudiced environment, whichmight lead to acts of violence or sexual violence, their scholarship represents a growing concern about how terms like "rape culture" and "lad

culture" are not being examined in context-specific enough ways. Moreover, it shows that critics, activists, and authors using these terms often use them at cross-purposes with what they rightfully seek to explore.

Those making a case for "rape culture" argue that certain aspects of Western popular culture and language contribute to broader social and institutional factors that have created a social environment in which sexual violence and rape are normalised or trivialised. For example, in the years just before O'Neill's *Asking For It* was published, the term "frape" became popular on Irish social media as well as in common usage in youth culture. The term – meaning to hack someone's Facebook account after they have left themselves logged in – could be considered as contributing to "rape culture" as a reality in Ireland because of how it trivialises the seriousness of rape by reframing it as a prank or joke. In the wake of multiple accusations of rape and sexual assault against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, and following the mounting outrage and mass protest following Donald Trump's election as president, actresses at the 2018 Golden Globes film awards ceremony wore black dresses in a gesture of female solidarity. Pop culture persona Oprah Winfrey stated that "brutally powerful men" had "broken" something in the culture (qtd. in Higgins, 2018). Oprah's contention was founded on arguing that discrimination against women permeates film-making culture and broader Western culture to the extent that sexual assault and rape have become customary and excusable.

Although the "culture" aspect of the argument in these examples is limited to social media and its usage within a particular structure – the university setting – and to Hollywood, examples such as these are often used as evidence of "rape culture" in a non-discriminatory way, suggesting the problematic nature of the term itself. The word "culture" used after the word "rape" to create the term "rape culture" implies the reality that rape is a defining characteristic of the entire people or society it refers to. Furthermore, it suggests that violence is inherently linked to sexuality as a fact of life. The all-encompassing nature of the term,

"rape culture", implicates a people in their entirety, when what is actually in question is a much more specific set of traditions and social behaviours.

Katie Roiphe raises concerns about the effect of "rape culture" and the "MeToo" movement on American sexual culture in her article for Harper Magazine, "The Other Whisper Network" (2019). She states, the "MeToo" movement "rightfully seeks to hold corrupt, bullying men to account for their actions" but warns that "doctrine meant to protect againstsexual harassment might have reached a damaging level of absurdity". Roiphe argues that Josephine Livingston's comment, "you probably shouldn't kiss anybody without asking… the world has changed, and affirmative consent is now the standard" is an expression of the"friendly yet threatening tone of low-level secret policeman in a new totalitarian state".

In early 90s America when *Take Back the Night* rallies (protests about sexual violence) and sexual harassment training were taking place across college campuses, following an increase in reports of sexual assault and rape, Roiphe's critique of sexual politics *The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism* (1994) received criticism for arguing that the "rape crisis movement" was a fraud. Most notably, Naomi Wolf criticised Roiphe's "important observations about the dangers of creating a victim culture in the name of feminism" as "weakened by faulty reasoning" ("Date Rape Debate"). Roiphe's text compared the language in the date-rape pamphlets given out on college campuses in the 90s to Victorian guides of conduct for young ladies and warned about women's "victimization". Roiphe's reaction to a renewed era of informed consent, embraced by the American zeitgeist in the wake of the "MeToo" era in the twenty-tens, courted controversy and received criticism. Roiphe raises the concern that the "angry extreme" energy of the "MeToo" movement is in danger of ignoring the relevance of proportion and the need to differentiate between "smaller offenses and assault". She warns, "we are alarmed at the rampant and slippery Trumpian tendency to blame "all immigrants" or "all Muslims" [but] blaming all

men seems to me only a little less ominous". She argues that a "presumptive criminalization of all male sexual initiatives" could result in a realisation of Joan Didion's concern about a "feminist idea of sex that assumed women were wounded birds". Whilst Roiphe raises important concerns, the language she uses is in danger of undermining the intricacies within/of sexual harassment and violence.

Kate Harding's sociological exploration of sexual violence, *Asking For It*, and O'Neill's novel *Asking For It* were published the same year: 2015. Depictions of sexuality in O'Neill's novel align more with Harding's sensationalist, radical feminist criticism than with the more nuanced critical approach of Peggy Orenstein or Laura Kipnis, whose writing (explored later in more detail) considers the challenges involved in navigating the implications of perceiving "rape culture" as a reality for all young people, as well as the possible negative effects of actions such as "positive consent" classes and legislation on sexual culture and freedom.

According to Kate Harding, "every American boy is at risk of growing up to be a rapist" (qtd. in Nate Ryan, 2015) and, as stated by Jessica Valenti,"rape is as American as apple pie" (qtd. in Goren, 2014). As these statements suggest, opinions expressed with the intention of working towards mitigating the harms of perceived "rape culture" can inadvertently oversimplify the complex issues of power relations. This is further demonstrated by Rebecca Solnit's statement in response to the Isla Vista shootings: "It begins with these microaggressions; it ends with rape and murder" (qtd. in Roiphe, interview). Solnit was speaking in the immediate wake of California's Isla Vista mass shootings, before which the twenty-two-year-old killer, Elliot Rodgers, posted a series of YouTube videos describing a "war on women" and how he would "slaughter every single spoiled, stuck up, blonde slut". Rodgers is clearly a very problematic figure for Solnit to use to support an argument for the existence of a "rape culture".

iii. The Socio-Cultural Context for a "Rape Culture" in Irish Society

As mentioned in the introduction, O'Neill saw parallels between debates about rape and sexual assault in American popular discourse and discussions in Ireland. O'Neill perceived the vilification of "Slane Girl" – a teenage girl photographed performing a sex act on a teenage boy at a concert in 2013 – on social media as an example of "slut-shaming", whereby conceptions of girls' worth and morality tied to their sexual virtue result in internalised oppression (Ringrose 2012, 333). O'Neill suggests that if the incident had involved a boy performing a sex act on a girl, it would not have been shared online or in papers. Considering the relative newness of social media in Irish youth culture atthe time, whether a similarly explicit photo of a boy performing a sex act on a girl in public would not have "gone viral" is debatable. O'Neill's argument that this incident reveals how girls' sexualities in Ireland are always subject to more surveillance and regulation than boys'does not take the role that social media played in exaggerating expressions of public condemnation about "Slane Girl" into consideration. Social media also plays a key role in making misogyny appear "rampant" in Irish universities.

Around the same time as "Slane Girl", Irish universities reported college boys sharing and rating girls' photographs on social media. Jack Power published a report in the University College Dublin student paper, *The College Tribune*, describing how an online platform, like Facebook chat, had been set up by male students to discuss and rate female students. The derogatory language reported to have been used on a public site is described by Carol Quigley as showing how "misogynist online forums are rampant among the student body of Ireland's largest university" (2019, 62). For Quigley, like O'Neill, isolated occurrences likethis or the earlier mentioned "fraping" in Irish colleges can be linked together to "exemplify rape culture in action" (62).

Social media is surely a noteworthy factor in how public rating and/or shaming occurs

and yet popular and academic discussion about "rape culture" largely ignore it. Also too often disregarded in discussions about "slut shaming" is how reductive the "boys will be boys" idea is to boys. The term "boys will be boys" is often used to explain aggressive or inappropriate sexual behaviour as naturally "male". In discussions about "slut shaming" it is often used to argue that whereas girls are sexually restrained, boys are sexually free. Not given enough attention is how the notion suggests that boys are enslaved to their sexual instincts and incapable of considered consent. "Boys will be boys" suggests that, at best, boys' are subject to a recklessness that results in the inevitable demoralisation of girls and, at worst, girls' violation.

Although, in their definition of "rape culture", Buchwald et al. state that the violence involved is "neither biologically or divinely ordained" (xi), much of the discourse around "rape culture" suggests otherwise. Quigley contends that in 2019 "rape culture" exists in Ireland as "a spectrum, with the physical act of sexual violence forming one end, and inappropriate comments, remarks and opinions at the other end" (2). This statement suggests the growing conceptualisation of sexual violence as a fact of life in both academic and popular Irish discourse.

Published in September 2015, *Asking For It* could be described as prescient, or at least discerningly well-timed. At the time of its publication, representation of cultural discourses around sexual assault, consent and gender roles was yet to become mainstream in Irish society. Whilst conversations about sexual double standards were gathering momentum, the term "rape culture" was not yet popular in Irish media or common parlance. The "MeToo" movement was yet to occur. *Only Ever Yours* and *Asking For It* were written just before issues of sexual consent and concepts of gender as an evolving social concept started to affect Irish society in several significant ways.

In the years following *Asking For It*'s publication, a re-evaluation of women's

economic, social and political status in Ireland provided momentum for the pro-choice movement and successful repeal of the Eighth Amendment making abortion legal from December 2018. 2018 was the year that feminist political activism called for, and successfully effected, gender equality policies in the workplace and improved rape and sexual assault legislation. 2018 also saw a significant review of sex education and the addition of sexual consent classes to Irish primary and secondary school. In August 2019, a Wicklow primary school announced its plans to introduce gender-neutral uniform policy demonstrating changing attitudes to gender identity. Together with issues surrounding women's health and bodily autonomy coming increasingly to the forefront of feminist activism in Ireland at this time, action addressing gender and salary imbalances saw gender policies announced in ten theatre organisations committed to reform and progress in July 2018. Alongside this, fresh scrutiny arose around how the Irish court system and media treated sexual violence. High-profile sexual assault cases led to public marches and discussions in the Dáil (the Irish parliamentary house) calling for legislative changes around practice and procedures in rape cases. These issues continue to be debated today, particularly concerning Ireland's defamation laws. O'Neill describes these laws as "so draconian that victims [of rape and sexual assault] are afraid of speaking out lest they be sued" and argues that they are the cause of Ireland not having had "a proper MeToo movement" ("When I Look").

iv. Ireland as a "Rape Culture" in *Asking For It*

In *Only Ever Yours*, the eves are kept servile through fear of surveillance and punishment (as represented by weekly ranking and competition to be the #1 eve) and hope and reward (in the form of gaining an Inheritant). In *Asking For It*, social media and status similarly function as dominant apparatuses of power that disseminate patriarchal attitudes that socialise women. However, the beliefs and values of the majority of characters and institutions, especially the Catholic church, are most strongly presented as normalising sexual violence and fostering an

environment in which the act of rape results in blaming the victim rather than the perpetrator.

During her fourteen years of convent schooling, O'Neill was likely to have experienced the kind of Catholic education that her contemporary Una Mullaly – born in 1983 – contends indoctrinated her to believe that "sex was dangerous, and certainly not to be spoken about with adults beyond the classroom context" (2018, loc.75). This experience and the construal of Ireland as a country "built on secrets" and the Irish, a "people broken by shame and silence" (O'Neill "Today") is central to the characterisation of Denis and Nora (Emma's parents) in *Asking For It* as well as to the depiction of attitudes to sex in the text. Despite their relative youthfulness, Emma's parents are stoically inept at engaging Emma in direct discussion about her sexual assault. Their private arguments are characterised by disconnectedness and blame. Neither are capable of emotional self-governance in the wake of the assault: Nora resorts to bun making and day-drinking; Denis to blustering avoidance and staying late at work. Nor can they provide emotional support: Nora shouts at Emma drunkenly; Denis avoids eye contact. Neither parent can touch Emma. In response to public speculation about Emma's sexual promiscuity, Denis is exasperated that Nora did not know what Emma was "up to" and relieved that his parents are already dead because the "shame would have killed them" (255). Emma's parents lack vulnerability and honesty, even before the assault. Platitudinous compliments take the place of real conversation in interactions between Emma and her father: "you look beautiful, Emma"; "There's my princess". At the end of the novel, when Emma withdraws her complaint, her brother Bryan's explosion of anger – "I refuse to participate in this fucking charade" (329) – stands in sharp contrast to Emma's parents' silence. Her mother greets Emma with the same meaningless platitude, her slight pause midway through the only indication of feeling: "'you look really' … She hesitates, just for a second. 'You look really beautiful this morning'" (392). Despite Bryan's attempts to talk openly, the culture of silence depicted in the text ultimately overwhelms both generations.

Asking For It juxtaposes the conservative Catholic power relations determining the identities and behaviours of an older generation, with the liberal, consumerist, individualistic power relations determining those of a younger generation. Older characters' language is largely colloquial with many casual references to God. Emma's mother regularly says "for God's sake" (115), and her speech rhythms evoke a sense of the national and local: "Emma, you're making a holy show of yourself" (115). In contrast, Emma and her friends use the colloquial expressions "for God's sake" and "Jesus" alongside more mid-Atlantic language, like "Mom" and "Oh my god, you look so hot in that" (60). This distinguishes the generations but also highlights how they are bound together by religion. When Nora questions Emma's brother Bryan about having attended mass he "snorts" indicating a casual disdain and lack of respect for the institution (118). Bryan's dismissal of religious power makes the conversation between Emma and her mother, in which Nora relays having seen the boys who sexually assaulted and abused Emma being publicly venerated at local mass, all the more powerful. It acts as a searing representation of the enduring and hypocritical power the Catholic church still exerts on the society of Ballinatoom:

> "His sermon was about not judging others, and how important it is to assume that everyone is innocent until proven guilty. He didn't use any names – oh, he couldn't do that, could he? – but everyone knew who he was talking about, and your father and I like idiots in the top pew, after giving fifty euro to the collection plate… Then Father Michael waited at the church door until Sean Casey and Paul O'Brien …
>
> (What was Paul O'Brien doing at Mass?)
>
> '…came out, and he shook their hands, and offered his condolences.'
> Father Michael … christened me, he heard my first confession … he was there for my First Holy Communion and Confirmation … he doesn't believe me. None of them believe me" (293).

As the previous extract suggests, the Catholic church is implicated in keeping Emma, and others, "quiet" about her rape. The community gives the perpetrators of Emma's assault (Sean and Paul) most sympathy; Father Michael goes out of his way to publicly show his support for them. Emma's parent's embarrassment and their action of giving an overly

generous “fifty euro to the collection plate” indicates a sense of remorse and a desire to smooth over the incident. Significantly, it indicates that they believe that what happened to Emma was not rape and that Emma was complicit. Emma’s notable absence at mass further emphasises her ostracization from the community and isolation within her family. The reference to Father Michael having christened Emma as a baby adds to her sense of betrayal when she realises he has given a public sermon in support of Sean and Paul’s innocence. The absence of belief and support that Emma receives leads her to consider whether she had just been “making it up”, as Paul claims she has (303).

Following the assault, men and women discuss Emma as the “Balinatoom Girl” on T.V. chat shows, and refer to young girls as having “skirts up their backsides, and tops cut down to their bellybuttons ... practically asking to be attacked” (186). This deliberately references experiences of rape victims, such as those involved in the Maryland and Steubenville cases, referred to in the introductory chapter. Like Emma, the sixteen-year-old girl in the Steubenville, Ohio case had been drinking before she was assaulted and the rape took place ata party. Like in the novel, images of the assault were distributed through social media after which the victim received abuse and comments blaming her.

O’Neill depicts the use of language in public discourse and in media scripts as highly influential to real-life behaviour. Carole Quigley describes comments made by Irish broadcaster, George Hook, on national radio in 2017 regarding a specific case of sexual violence, as an “Irish performance of rape culture” (70). Hook pronounced “modern-day social activity” (consensual sex with strangers) as posing a particular threat for women (qtd. in Holland, 2017). Undeniably, Hook’s suggestion that if a woman goes back to a stranger’s room for consensual sex, she should not be “surprised” when “somebody else comes into a room” and rapes her, is reprehensible – and injurious to both women and men. However, Quigley’s contention that “opinions such as Hooks” could be interpreted as a justification for

sexual violence for those prone to commit such acts in the first place" is troublesome (70). Firstly, "those prone to commit such acts" suggests an extensive, very indiscriminate group (70). Secondly, Quigley implies that language – ignorant, violent or dehumanising – is so persuasive a factor for that group that it might allow and excuse sexual violence. Like Quigley's criticism, O'Neill's novel not only proposes that language can inciteviolence but suggests that language creates such an insidiously indoctrinating social script that individuals' critical capabilities and personal choice-making capacities are negated.

Nevertheless, responses to Emma's rape in *Asking For It* work to undermine stereotypical ideas about rape and rape victims, such as the notion that women lie about being raped and that if women dress or behave a certain way, they are "asking" to be raped. Similarly subversive is O'Neill's construction of Emma. In Emma, O'Neill creates a protagonist who acts as an antagonist. Crafting Emma as an unlikeable and unsympathetic protagonist creates distance between her and the reader and generates resistance, on the part of the reader, to root for Emma unconditionally. This prompts the reader to confront his/her conception of a typical rape or rape victim and pressures them to contemplate the (flawed) nature of some societal reactions to rape and sexual assault.

v. Resisting and Reinforcing "Rape Myths" in YA Literature

Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* is taught in American schools and colleges and lauded as ground-breaking because of how it works to debunk "rape myths": "prejudicial, stereotyped, false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists" (Burt 1980, 217). The term "rape myth" was firstcoined by Martha Burt in 1980, and further explained by Kimberly Lonsway and Louise Fitzgerald in 1994 as denoting "attitudes and generally false beliefs about rape that are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women" (133). Despite the fact that high-school student Melinda has been raped by Andy, a fellow student, in Halse's novel, *Speak* does not present its protagonist as a victim.

Rather, through the process of naming her experience as rape, by telling her friend who is now dating her rapist about her experience, and by shouting "no" when her rapist attempts sexual violence again, Melinda overcomes the trauma of rape and is, in the end, emancipated. Melinda's struggle to say "no" was silenced by Andy covering her mouth during the rape. At the novel's close, Andy tries to rape her a second time by following her into the closet at school. When Andy tells her he never raped her, that she "wanted it as bad" as he did and pins her against the closed door, a "sound explodes" from her: "NNNOOO!!!", rendering him speechless (225). She holds a shard of glass to his neck, says "I said no" (226), and opens the door to her friends, who have been pounding on the door, "sweaty" and "angry", ready to believe and save her (227). Whilst this narrative is important in that it recognises and promotes the power that young women have, both individually and collectively, to effect change by not accepting rape, it remains problematic in terms of its representation of resistance and autonomy in essentialised terms. The novel's depiction of the rape as painful and non-consensual works to debunk "rape myths" that say women want, enjoy or deserve rape. However, the emphasis on Miranda's saying "no" adheres to other myths around "victim-blaming" and about what constitutes non-consent and rape. It disregards possible nuances and ambiguities around resistance and the impact of social context on the individual's chances of resistance.

Like *Speak*, *Asking For It* offers realism reflected in the social problem it addresses, and in its first-person narration. Unlike the conventional realism of *Speak*, though, O'Neill refuses to point to a solution. *Asking For It* has been met with criticism because of its bleak ending. Protagonist Emma's identity is eviscerated by the violent sexual assault and subsequent public shaming – to the point where she is disconnected from her own identity: "I make eye contact with the girl in the mirror…I belong to those boys now as surely as they have stamped me with a cattle brand" (339). The play adaptation of *Asking For It* was met with some criticism by theatre critic Peter Crawley concerning the play's portrayal of

Emma's victimhood. Crawley notes the play's engagement with issues of consent and recognises the cultural relevance afforded to the production because of its being "inspired by one gruesome US rape trial and staged in the wake of one much closer to home" but finds fault with the play's promotion of the idea that "victimhood is forever", which Crawley calls a "facet of rape culture". Crawley cites staging devices and directions employed by the production to symbolise Emma's increasing isolation and diminished sense of self. He notes how Emma's thoughts are mostly recorded voice-over, where previously they had been relayed in monologues. He argues that positioning Emma in "powerless spaces; her back to the audience or stranded upstage" contributes to her portrayal as a victim. The term "survivor" has gained preference to "victim" in discourses about sexual violence and rape in recent years. In her introduction to "'Victim' vs 'Survivor': feminism and language", Rahila Gupta argues, "the term 'survivor' is important because it recognises theagency of women, it focuses on individual capacity, but the notion of 'victim' reminds us of the stranglehold of the system" (abstract). Crawley's criticism corresponds with contemporary feminism's concern with modelling women's subjectivity in terms other than those of passive victims of the patriarchy. However, his argument does not consider the significance of the unconventional ending to O'Neill's text.

Emma's final narration: "I walk downstairs, dragging my mouth into a smile so that I look normal. It's important that I look normal now. It's important that I look like a good girl" (340), does signal her giving into "victimhood forever". However, like her internal thoughts and comments about other girls throughout the text, these final comments also indicate how encultured she is in the conceptualisation of female passivity and male dominance. It could be argued that O'Neill's depiction of capitulation and destruction for Emma rather than emancipation and recovery works to provoke important discussions about "women's internal barriers to agency and choice" (Deveaux 236).

A bleakness about the capacity of the individual to effect change is communicated by the text's ending – compounded by the fact that efforts to fight the system made by the text's secondary characters, like Emma's brother, are unsuccessful. Conversely, characters such as these function as a clever reversal of the more typical YA character who fights adversity (like Katniss in *The Hunger Games* or Melinda in *Speak*). Many YA texts present autonomy in essentialised terms: characters are often portrayed as realising an innate power or "finding their voice" when faced with adversity. O'Neill's alternative ending imparts – especially in the case of *Asking For It*'s Emma – a frank and complex evaluation of the capacity for healing after great trauma. Of *Asking For It*'s ending, O'Neill said, "I wanted the reader to finish this book and be absolutely furious. Furious about what happened to Emma, furious about our low rate of [rape] conviction, furious at the fact the victim is blamed. That rage is the only way change is going to be enacted" (*Late Late Show* interview).

Nonetheless, placing Catholic tradition at the forefront of the regressive attitudes to sex and social norms that see Emma's family in *Asking For It*, and Emma herself, unable to talk about what has happened to her, leaves the reader with a depressing sense of Ireland. O'Neill's argument that this ending is "true to the narrative itself" (342) aligns with her convictions that "we teach our girls how not to get raped with a sense of doom, a sense that we are fighting a losing battle" (342). *Asking For It*'s deliberately dark ending confronts readers with the unsentimental realistic outcome of many real-life rape cases. Whilst important for its realistic message, it is in danger of refuting the possibility for any real transformation.

Comparatively, Deirdre Sullivan's YA novel *Needlework*, published in 2016, explores sexual abuse, domestic violence, neglect and self-harm with an unsentimental hopefulness. Unlike O'Neill's Emma or Halse Anderson's Melinda, Sullivan's protagonist, Ces's re-engagement with the world following her experience of sexual violence comes from

her re-experiencing her body (and the bodies of others) in positive and pleasurable ways. Ces's self-recovery, according to Sullivan, comes about by Ces making her body "her own again" and creating "beautiful scars of her own choosing" (*Irish Times*). The act of tattooing her own body and others' bodies allows Ces to rewrite her experience, reclaim her identity and body, and positively impact others' bodies. In contrast, *Asking For It*'s narrative prefaces the re-enactment of a questionably outdated cultural regime that sees Emma overcome by victimhood to the extent that any other aspect of personhood is annihilated. Rather than interrogate the possibility of Ireland outgrowing the damaging aspects of its history, culture, and identity, in which the Catholic religion has played an integral part, a static conception of Ireland as eternally stunted by tradition and silence is maintained.

vi. Sex and Power in *Asking For It* and *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces*

The perception of a sexual double standard established and upheld by men and disadvantageous to women in *Asking For It* is troublingly extreme. Violence recast as sex provides limited roles; young men are mostly depicted as permanently sexually alert and hostile, and young women as sexually restricted and submissive. In keeping with Buchwald et al.'s "rape culture", "it is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent" (xi). The description of boys' actions is overwhelmingly aggressive: "Kevin throwing me against a wall at a party, his teeth sharp"; "he is dragging me into a dimly lit bedroom"; "hands on my shoulders, pushing me down" (29). Even non-sexual interactions are described as being overly dominant and forceful, "he reaches across me, grabbing my wrist" (34). Several references are made to adult men and teenage boys of Emma's own age looking her up and down (51/3). Emma thinks of her own sexual urges as something she needs to "keep under control" (33). Her insecurities about how she looks keep her from enjoying sex and she views it only as an avenue to power; to be better than other girls. Emma's sexuality is depicted as so regulated that the novel runs the risk of erasing the existence of girls' sexual

desire and agency because O'Neill is so concerned with presenting the female body as a locus of morality and shame.

Comparatively, *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces* undermines notions of "slut-shaming". In Quintero's novel, Gabi worries about her sexual desires, thinking "girls are not supposed to think that way" (loc.2559). However, Gabi is freer with her thoughts, questions the validity of her sexuality having to be restricted, and enjoys her "badness". She wonders "where is it written that girls have to wait for boys to kiss them?" (loc. 567). She writes about wanting to run at Martin and "throw him up against a wall" and "feel the wetness" of his lips. When musing on whether she is a "slut" because she is lusting after Martin while seeing Eric, her humour and lack of genuine concern show. She thinks, "does that make me a wicked woman? Probably … I am going to have a grilled cheese sandwich and think about this precarious situation" (loc. 754). Gabi's attitude that "this is America and the twenty-first century; not Mexico one hundred years ago" permeates the novel's first-person narration. Set against Gabi's understanding that if she tells her mother this, she would think that Gabi is "bad, or worse: trying to be white", this creates the central tension in this novel, and facilitates its complex analysis of sexual relations and the challenges involved for girls and boys in navigating "positive consent" and the "rape culture" depicted in the novel.

Representations of sexual power in *Asking For It* do not consider how there are dualities of power in any sexual or love relationship; submissiveness and dominance do not always adhere to gender, or in fact, to other forms of oppression. Following stereotypical notions, the novel presents male sex drives as rapacious; men see women as objects, and female sex drives as hypergamous; women see men as avenues to power. Emma meets the criteria of what is deemed beautiful by those around her. Thus, she has sexual power – the aims and objectives of which are questionable. She takes pleasure in wielding this power effectively for her gain and uses it to maintain status and get what she wants. Still, Emma's sexual power is predominantly destructive to her. Her desire to be considered the most

beautiful and sexually gratifying exceeds her own opinion, comfort or pleasure.

In comparison to Ali, who seems to determine what she wears based on her style, Emma (and most other girls) wear clothes they know will make them attractive to boys. When Emma appears to enjoy a moment of genuine sexual attraction with Conor, that sees them both physically communicating consent, "I turn my head towards him, and he does the same…he starts to make circles at my waist, agonizingly slow", Emma wonders, "what it would be like to pull his T-shirt over his head and to kiss him" (75). When it seems that Emma might act on her sexual instincts, her thoughts return to how her actions will affect Conor, not what it will feel like for her. She wonders what pulling his T-shirt off and kissing him "would do to him" (75).

Unlike Gabi, who is attracted to her boyfriend because she finds him physically pleasing and intellectually stimulating, Emma is attracted to the GAA players based on their power position. She will not choose Conor because his social status is too low. Conor is constructed as the "good guy". He shows restraint, drinking less that the others. He is concerned rather than predatory when girls are drunk. The other boys mock and jibe at the girls about their appearance, "are you cold Emma? Looks like you're cold" (86). In comparison, Conor's behaviour is kinder, more empathetic. When Emma's heels get stuck in the cattle grid going into the party at Casey's farm and the other boys laugh, Conor carries her across. His chivalry could be interpreted as seeking sexual reward from Emma, but his efforts to also help Ali prove his behaviour comes from a place of genuine respect. Nevertheless, Conor's moral attitude represents the exception rather than the majority. This raises questions about the representation of male sexuality and morality in the text and the depiction of boys as demonstrating a connection between everyday disrespect of women and the potential for violence. Also, it presents Emma's choice-making capacities in a problematic manner. Emma's faults, in terms of how she uses her sexual power, her

mistreatment of her friends, and her inability to advance the positive relationship with Conor, are presented as resulting from her being shaped by her environment. This distorted representation offers a bleak view of sexual and emotional relationships. By contrast, *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* manages to present the constitutive nature of gender norms without falling into the trap of cultural determinism.

Gabi is affected by the gender inequalities she faces but not wholly overwhelmed and incapacitated by them. When Gabi is attracted to Ian – a more attractive boy with higher social status than her boyfriend – her thinking denotes an independence and critical ability beyond what has been imposed by her environment. She thinks his attempts to persuade her into sex are like

> "a scene from a cheesy teen flick where the guy is about to convince the poor unsuspecting girl to have sex by telling her she is very pretty, then lightly brushing a strand of hair from her face. And the stupid girl falls for it even though she suspects the hot boy is only after one thing" (loc. 2241).

She is also able to experience romance in a way unattainable to Emma. In *Gabi*, details about Gabi's relationship with Martin are romantic without being sentimental. When Martin brings the Dr Zeuss book, *Oh The Places We'll Go*, as a gift for Gabi's premature baby brother, she thinks, "this guy is so optimistic. I think I love him" (loc. 1865). When Emma sees Conor's caring side, she either manipulates it to her gain or considers him unattractive.

Inequalities, such as how Emma's parents treat her and her brother differently in *Asking For It*, are presented as rigidly systemic and as making up a part of a broader continuum of "rape culture". Gabi notes how her boyfriend Martin is freer to stay out late than she and how this is part of the "boys will be boys mantra that we live by" (loc. 2503). She observes how her mother sets different rules for her brother. If he goes out to meet a girl, Gabi's mother says "make sure you take a condom" (loc. 2503). When Gabi goes out with Martin, her mother makes sure to meet him so that if "something happens" to Gabi she will "know how to describe him to the police" (loc. 2503). Unlike Emma, Gabi recognises the

hypocrisy of her mother's attitude, and although she feels apathetic about trying to change her mother's mind, thinking that she will just say "it's different Beto is a boy and they can't help it. Besides, you have more to lose than him", she recognises other contributory factors to her mother's attitude, such as race and age (loc. 2511). Gabi also succeeds in more fully addressing a deficiency of modern feminism: how the discourse of acknowledging women's frequent victimisation says too little about female pleasure. Considering the reasons for this, it is necessary to bear in mind the lengthier evolution of debates about "rape culture" in American society and its subsequent impact on American YA literature.

vii. The Evolution of "Rape Culture" Narratives in America

Susan Brownmiller's *"*Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape" (1975) was influential to psychological studies that explored the existence of a culture of rape in American society, such as psychologist Mary Koss's findings, which stated that one in five women were victims of rape – a statistic that continues to influence social and academic views of rape and provoke polarised opinions. Brownmiller argued for the existence of "a conscious process of intimidation" in America "by which *all men* keep *all women* in a state of fear" (15). Brownmiller's totalising language is common in some feminist debate about "rape culture". In 1991 Andrea Dworkin stated, "we live under what amounts to a military curfew. Enforced by rapists" ("Terror, Torture and Resistance" 38). Robin Warshaw's 1988 *I Never Called It Rape* and Mary Koss's findings, from which the text drew, were largely contributory to the focus of student activism in the 1990s. Mary Koss administered her initial survey to over 3,800 students at Kent State. Based on these findings, she identified that rape was prevalent on campus. More controversially, she found that over half of her female respondents who agreed their experience aligned with the legal definition of rape did *not* simultaneously agree that these experiences were rape. Koss's question, which constituted the legal definition of rape, was "have you ever had sexual intercourse with a man when you didn't want to because

he used some degree of physical force?" (qtd. in Rutherford, 2018). Koss's "hidden rape victim" – awoman who says they have experienced the legal and behavioural definition of rape, but doesnot call it rape – became, and has remained, central to ensuing debates.

Koss's revised study – administered to over 6,000 students across 32 institutions in the United States – found a big variation between women's definition of rape dependent on whether the experience took place with a stranger or a date/acquaintance. Only 55 percent of respondents who reported a "completed rape perpetrated by a stranger" also said "I believe I was a victim of rape", and if the "completed rape was perpetrated by an acquaintance, this went down to only 23 percent" (qtd. in Rutherford). Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak,* referred to earlier, fictionalised many of the issues that Koss's findings and Warshaw's text raised.

Although this variation and the question of why women were reluctant to call their experiences rape was the emphasis of Koss's findings and the focus of Warshaw's subsequent book, critical attention focused on undermining the statistic of 1:5 and the legitimacy of date/acquaintance rape. The 1:5 statistic influenced changes made to education and legislation about how matters of sexual assault were dealt with on college campuses. The 1990 Clery Act required colleges and universities to publish annual reports on security and crime statistics and provide information about sexual assault programmes and policies. In turn, this effected change on sexual culture in American colleges. Today, the statistic is still frequently drawn on to intensify public efforts to identify, prevent and prosecute sexual assaults. Several gang-rape cases involving high school/college young adults in the early 2000s brought renewed debate to the fore. In 2014, *TIME* magazine stated that the "one-in-five statistic has become a rallying cry for campus judicial reform and entered the public lexicon through widespread dissemination by the media and the Obama administration" (Berenson). That year the White House Task Force was created by the then United States president Barack Obama to combat campus sexual assault. RAINN (The Rape, Abuse and

Incest National Network in America) made recommendations that included the following statement:

> In the last few years, there has been an unfortunate trend towards blaming "rape culture" for the extent of sexual violence on campuses. While it is helpful to point out the systemic barriers to addressing the problem, it is important not to lose sight of a simple fact: Rape is caused not by cultural factors but by the conscious decisions of a small percentage of the community, to commit a violent crime (www.rainn.org).

In 2017, after President Trump took over office, fresh attention was given to college administration's power in matters of sexual assault. Jessica Valenti argued that Trump's Education Secretary, Betsy De Vos, was "enabling rape deniers" by attempting to roll back on the Obama-era policy that gave authority to college campuses to carry out sexual assault tribunals ("Why is Betsy De Vos Enabling Rape Deniers?").

Koss's one in five statistic was mirrored in a recent Irish student survey. In 2015 the *Trinity News* newspaper published an article in which Catherine Healy states, "one in every four female TCD (Trinity College Dublin) students sexually assaulted" (trinitynews.ie). Carole Quigley argues that this survey and other similar studies conducted by other universities in the Republic of Ireland in recent years show that Irish universities are "following in the footsteps of American and British universities that have systemic problems with sexual violence" (107). Quigley fails to consider the nuance involved in such studies and the problematic implications of how they might be received when that nuance is not taken into consideration. The 2013 University College Dublin survey Quigley cites, for example, showed that of the two thousand seven hundred and fifty students who took part in the study, sixteen per cent "experienced some form of unwanted sexual experience during their time as a student at their current higher education institution" (107). While it is important not to downplay the significance of each student's individual experience, there ought to be some recognition of the breadth of variation within the responses to the question posed. Discussions in the media about these surveys often conflate individual experiences into a composite and sometimes sensationalised, whole.

Uncompromising, inflammatory language tends to overwhelm balanced, two-dimensional argument in discussions about a "rape culture". Debates on the subject in academia and media regularly feature divisive, radical terminology. Criticism refuting a "rape culture" features terms like "big lie" (McElroy 2014) "conspiracy" (Hoff Sommers 2014) "ridiculous" (Paglia, qtd. in Whelan, 2015) a "dangerous myth" (Gittos 2015); "hysteria" (McElroy, Gittos). The language used by critics arguing for its existence is similarly unflinchingly bold. Terms like "pervasive", "epidemic", and "crisis" have been synonymous with discussions about a cultureof rape in America since the early '90s. This was arguably influenced by Andrea Dworkin's heavy use of war terminology in speeches like, "Terror, Torture and Resistance" (1991). Likewise, scholarly responses to opposing views are often provocative and damningly severe. Arguing against a "rape culture", Wendy McElroy stated that "those who use the big lie of 'rape culture' to promote their politics have more in common with rapists than they know; both usethe pain and fear of women to their advantage" (2014) Aligning the arguments of those who oppose your opinion with rapists in this way is dangerously close to using rape as a metaphor, and likely to incite heated argument and leave little room for calm critical debate.The use of terms like "rape deniers" and "pro-rape against critics who contest rape culture works similarly. The extremeness of terminology like "rape deniers" is problematic because it categorises those wishing to critically interrogate the existence of rape culture alongside "Holocaust deniers", and because it blurs the focus away from the central arguments and promotes angry dispute rather than rational debate.

The recklessly pejorative term "rape denier", and the equally accusatory term "pro-rape", have both been used to describe Katie Roiphe's critical analysis of a culture of rape – a reaction she described (in equally inflammatory manner) as "Stalinist" (qtd. in Glancy interview, 2018). Although some of what Roiphe has to say is problematic, her argument that "rape culture" promotes fear rather than pleasure, and censure more than agency in sexual relations is important. As is communicated by the title of her 2017 book, *"If this is feminism,*

it's feminism hijacked as melodrama." Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus,Laura Kipnis shares her contention. Like Roiphe, Kipnis makes the argument that power in the hands of college campus regulators – whose budgets expanded the more students they found guilty of sexual assault – led to micro-behaviours, such as glances or jokes, becoming subject to policing in a manner like McCarthyistic Witch Trials (*Unwanted*). She states, "future generations will look back on the recent upheavals in sexual culture on American campuses and see officially sanctioned hysteria. They'll wonder how supposedly rational people could have succumbed so easily to collective paranoia, just as we look back on previous such outbreaks" (introduction, 1).

Roiphe's 1993 text, *The Morning After*, criticised Koss's 1:5 statistic as inflated and unreliable and critiqued its influence on changing social and academic views of rape. Roiphe and other critics of "rape culture", such as Hoff Sommers, raise important victimisation questions. Sommers states "I believe that exaggerated claims of victimisation fuel the rape culture movement… I can imagine many cases where someone was incapacitated, unconscious: could not consent…But there are other cases where it can be quite debatable" (qtd. in Tessa Berenson, "1 in 5"). However, both Roiphe and Hoffman also conflate drunken sex with more severe assault, thereby undermining the issue's gravity.

viii. Consent, Alcohol and Sex in *Asking For It*

Kate Harding, Laura Kipnis and Peggy Orenstein explore the complex relationship between alcohol, drugs and sexual crime in their feminist criticism. They each recognise the fragmented relationship between concepts of – and the reality of – rape, rape victims, and rapists. They agree on the need to readdress sexual assault and rape dynamics to reduce instances of sexual violence. Harding's emphasis, like O'Neill's, focuses on how cultural misconceptions affect victims of rape. Despite Harding's statement that "we need to change

the way we think about sexual violence to better protect the rights of both the victims and the accused", she does not investigate or consider – in the same way that Orenstein and Kipnis do – the weight of influence and consequence of "rape culture" on both genders (loc. 1374). Depictions in O'Neill's *Asking For It* affiliate with Harding in this way; whereas, Quintero's *Gabi* makes strides to confront the intricacies involved. In *Girls and Sex*, Peggy Orenstein's line of reasoning corresponds with Harding's argument that blaming victims of rape for being drunk puts "the onus for rape on anything except rapists" (Harding, loc. 2699). Orenstein agrees that there is an over-emphasis placed on girls' behaviour in arguments about alcohol and sexual assault. Also, telling girls not to drink limits their autonomy and sustains girls' concepts as sexual "gatekeepers" and boys as "aggressors". Moreover, like Harding, she supports feminists countering arguments that women ought to drink less to reduce their susceptibility to sexual violence with "don't tell us not to drink; tell rapists not to rape" (186).

Harding's analysis of consent's subjective nature distinguishes hers from Orenstein's criticism – particularly concerning alcohol and sex. Although Harding takes certain measures to acknowledge the dangers of generalisation in her statements, her criticism is still sometimes sensationalist. By contrast, Orenstein's approach in *Girls and Sex* is more nuanced. She considers how consent can be difficult to gauge in certain instances, especially if both parties are intoxicated. Harding describes a "cultural obsession" with "rape-preventative measures" and makes a good case for it by referencing advertising and college pamphlets which placed responsibility for rape prevention on female victims or with their female friends. One such campaign in 2011 stated, "Date Rape: see what happens when your friend drinks too much"; another, "she said no, but he kept going. And now your friend is on the bathroom floor, bruised and victimised. See how you could have prevented this" (loc. 1030).

Conversely, Orenstein describes "harm reduction" and raises concerns that those who

have advocated sensibly for such measures have been unfairly labelled “rape apologists” (186). This makes Orenstein’s criticism (written the same year as Harding’s in 2016) more current and appropriate to today’s climate. In Laura Kipnis’s description of the current climate, she argues that critical debate is “out of fashion” and that a “cult of feeling” with an “authoritarian underbelly” has resulted in a “radical transformation” of the sexual and intellectual situation in higher education in America (introduction, 1).

In *Girls and Sex*, Orenstein argues that “yes means yes” might create a “desperately needed reframing of the public conversation away from the negative – away from viewing boys as exclusively aggressive and girls as exclusively vulnerable, away from the embattled and the acrimonious – and towards what healthy, consensual, mutual encounters between young people ought to look like” (201). She maintains that “focusing on girls’ drinking is not enough” and argues that reasonable advocations for harm reduction should consider both victims and perpetrators of sexual violence (188). She argues that “at the heart of the argument over consent is another argument about drinking” (185). Orenstein’s observation is key to her analysis of American college campus sexual culture and her evaluation of the relationship between binge drinking and sexual assault. Orenstein’s description of the “paradox of students’ lives: drunkenness is obligatory for hook-ups, yet liquor negates consent” holds acute relevance to O’Neill’s portrayal of teenage binge-drinking’s relationship with sexual assault (188).

Asking For It highlights the relationship between drinking behaviour and sexual behaviour amongst Irish teenagers and poses questions about different consequences for boys and girls. The representation of consent, alcohol and sex in the novel supports Orenstein’s argument that a positive “yes means yes” model of consent is necessary. Accounts of girls’ engagement with alcohol and drugs contrast greatly to boys’. Girls are “wasted” or “a mess” (67/74). O’Neill uses language that infers an extreme keenness to get intoxicated: the girls

"thrust" drinks into each other's hands; "throw" them back; "drain" them. Emma regularly drinks and takes drugs until she is incapacitated. The night of the assault, she pre-drinks alone in her bedroom, "I take a swig of my drink, wincing as the sharp taste of vodka hits my throat, burning a hole in my empty stomach" (60). Emma's female friends' relationships with alcohol are similarly extreme: Ali brings cough syrup to the party from her father's pharmacy; and Jamie, despite the "hint of vomit underneath her perfume", continues to drink heavily and "drain" Conor's measure of cough syrup, as well as her own (66). The boys drink too, and some are intoxicated. Matt Reynolds "falls out of the TV room ... covered in a film of sweat", his eyes unfocused (80). One of the boys involved in sexually assaulting Emma, is so drunk that he vomits. Generally, though, the boys remain less affected by alcohol than the girls, and, significantly, the boys control their surroundings. They dominate the music, the Xbox, and the drugs that the girls stumble around accepting from them.

Jamie's narrative in the novel dramatises and elaborates key elements of Orenstein's feminist understanding of the relationship between sexual violence and alcohol and signposts the need to analyse the complications of college campus binge drinking more deeply concerning sexual assault. On the night of Emma's sexual assault, at the party at Casey's farmhouse, Jamie is far drunker than the others. Before going to the bathroom to vomit she "scores" (kisses) Colin Daly, who tries to have sex with her. Jamie's peers reaction to her "scoring" a boy while incapacitated provides insight into what constitutes "normal" sexual interactions and boundaries within the text's society (89). Aware of Jamie's excessive drunkenness, the others speculate that she is probably nervous about seeing Dylan with his girlfriend, Julie, because, as they understand it, she had consensual sex with Dylan before the novel's setting, which she now regrets. When Emma and Jamie are alone in the bathroom, their conversation clarifies that Jamie "didn't want to" have sex with Dylan at a party the previous Hallowe'en and that she is upset with Emma for telling her to say nothing about it. Although what Jamie said to Emma at the time is not included in the novel, Emma's

remembered reaction implies that Jamie told Emma she was raped: "be careful… you can't just say stuff like that. When you say that word, you can't take it back…Dylan is a dick, but he isn't that, he wouldn't do that" (93). Emma recalls telling Jamie, "Let's just pretend it didn't happen. It's easier that way. Easier for you" (94). However, following Emma's advice has not helped Jamie. In the bathroom, Emma tries to downplay Jamie's upset, telling her "Come on. Stop it… it's happened to loads of people. It happens all the time. You wake up the next morning, and you regret it or you don't remember what happened exactly, but it's easier not to make a fuss" (92). Jamie insists "but I told you. I didn't want…I didn't want to" (92). Emma argues that because Jamie "didn't say no…you told me you didn't say no", what happened to her was not rape. Jamie counters with, "I didn't say yes either" (92).

Emma's response illuminates fears that deter victims of sexual assault from reporting the crimes committed against them. Emma refuses to believe her friend, not out of genuine disbelief, but out of a deep unwillingness to name what happened to Jamie rape. In *Gabi A Girl in Pieces*, Gabi articulates dangerous misconceptions about what constitutes rape as girls like Emma might understand them, "if he doesn't beat you up, then it's not really rape. Everyone knows that. Also, he wasn't a stranger. He was someone you cared about, just a boy being a boy" (loc. 2436). Significantly, though, Gabi and other central characters are conscious of the hypocrisy of such attitudes. Furthermore, Quintero extends the impact of dangerous misconceptions around sex as having an effect on boys too. Gabi wonders whether the boy who raped her friend Cindy "even knew that it was rape", and wonders if he thought "that's how it's supposed to go down, with a girl crying all the time" (loc. 2771).

Like Orenstein's *Girls and Sex*, Jamie and Emma's conversation highlights the dangers (for heterosexual girls) in placing the responsibility for consent and non-consent during sexual encounters with women rather than on women and men. Emma's reference to "regret" is arguably intended as an example of her own misunderstanding of consent.

Authorial agenda aside, the reference to regret in *Asking For It* might give O'Neill's text more nuance and subtlety than it has in other places: it indicates the substantial difference between regret and incapacity and at least points towards a conversation about it. This is surely a topic for discussion that ought to have been included in the education pack created by The Abbey Theatre for use with secondary school students. The pack, like the text, however, misses the chance of confronting the issue.

Narratively, Jamie's sexual assault is significant because it foreshadows Emma's sexual assault. More significantly, it allows O'Neill to represent societal beliefs about rape. The girls' reactions to Jamie's drunkenness show their belief in male predators' inevitable danger and their acceptance that it is their responsibility to thwart that danger. They are almost accepting of the inevitable violence/dangers that can be done to them and harsh and uncaring in their desires to help each other. Ali leaves a vomiting Jamie with Emma so that she can go after the boy she fancies. Emma stays but is not concerned about Jamie. She sends Maggie a snapchat and takes a selfie for Instagram. Rather than feeling sorry for her friend Emma feels disgust, "Look at yourself.… You're ruining your make-up" (92). Emma's self-preservation speaks to teenagers' single-mindedness; it also raises deeper concerns about a squandered opportunity for O'Neill to subvert harmful stereotypes about girls' behaviour. Despite the gravity of what Jamie told Emma, the narrative describes Emma remembering that she felt "uncomfortable" and "weirdly excited by the drama" (93). It seems strange that Emma's worries about missing "out on all the parties" in future and getting into trouble for under-age drinking would override her concern with helping a friend who has just told her she has been raped (94). *Asking For It* succeeds in elaborating key elements of feminist insights into sexual assault; however, paradoxically, this feminist take is not carried through in the treatment of female agency concerning, not only sexuality and character-formation but also, the capacity for female friendship.

The novel suggests that Emma's keenness to detach herself from the situation comes from her having internalised rape myths. It is implied that Emma is afraid for Jamie – and likely, by association, for herself – that she will not be believed, and that they will be socially isolated. She knows what happened to Jamie was not morally right, but she does not want to be confronted by it: "I need to get away from this. From her" (79). The others think Jamie had drunken sex and regrets it. Their reactions – ranging from blame, dismissal and mocking – are similarly troubling: they do not question whether her intoxication could have meant that she did not consent to have sex with Dylan. Instead, they assume she is embarrassed about having sex with him because he has a girlfriend. Eli (Maggie's boyfriend) comments that Jamie "shouldn't have fucked him then" but "shit, she was wasted that night though" (67). Emma thinks later that Jamie should "take it easy"; that she should "know what happens when you drink too much" (70). Both reactions place the blame squarely on Jamie's shoulders for regretted drunken sex (as Eli sees it) and unwanted, non-consensual sex (as Emma sees it). From both perspectives, it was Jamie's fault because she was drunk.

Asking For It fictionalises some of Orenstein's more problematic contentions in *Girls and Sex*. O'Neill's overt representation of girls as sexually vulnerable and boys as predators aligns with Orenstein's argument that girls' cultural conditioning to be "nice" places them in a position of vulnerability when it comes to sexual encounters as teenagers and adults. Neither Orenstein's criticism nor O'Neill's text consider the drawbacks of presenting women and girls as universally "at risk" or conditioned by what some people would argue is "rape culture". Neither do they reflect on the possibility that the efforts behind a positive model of consent are well-intentioned but misguided efforts to give precedence to safety over freedom, or that, as a model of sexual interaction, it might promote fear more than confidence and restriction more than agency; nor that this might result in dangerously limited and regressive views of male, and primarily, female sexuality and behaviour.

ix. Totalising Configurations of Femininity and Masculinity in *Asking For It*

Totalising configurations of femininity and masculinity in *Asking For It* align with Marilyn Frye's theory of oppression: "women are oppressed, *as women*. Members of certain racial and/or economic groups and classes, both the males and the females, are oppressed *as* members of those races and/or classes. But men are not oppressed *as men*" (16). Frye concedes that men can suffer from the required restraint of acceptable male behaviour but that "barriers have different meanings to those on opposing sides of them, even though they are barriers to both" and that "being male is something that he has going *for* him, even if race or class or age or disability is going against him" (14). Opposingly, Caroline New argues that "gendered interests, including those of the oppressors, are constructed within gender orders, and cannot pre-exist them" (2001, 729). In their efforts to explore female subjectivity and undo essentialised notions of femininity, O'Neill's texts make dangerous suggestions about the intrinsic nature of men and fail to offer new configurations of femininity. Although men's oppression as men and women's oppression as women has historically not been symmetrical,O'Neill's depiction of enduring male privilege is questionable in today's context.

Michel Foucault contentiously argued that "when rape is punished, it is exclusively the physical violence that should be punished", and that one should consider rape "nothing but an assault" (qtd. in Deveaux 236). Monique Deveaux argues that this analysis sets up a "false dichotomy between power and violence as illustrated by the continuum of anger and physical abuse experienced by a battered woman because it does not question the fact that in many societies, men's freedom is contingent upon women's unfreedom" (236). She reasons, if feminists are to employ Foucault's framework of power, they must modify it to "include inquiry into subjective aspects of power", and to "reconceptualise the relationship between social and personal power and privilege, on one hand, and violence, on the other" (236).

Understandably, Foucault's argument that to treat rape as a sexual offence was to infuse it with a repressive power; thus, sexuality should not "under any circumstances be the object of punishment" is provocative in terms of presenting rape as biologically driven or normalised (qtd. in Deveaux 236). However, his intention to separate violence from sexuality is noteworthy in relation to my examination of the implications of the relationship between the perceived reality of a "rape culture" and female, and male, sexuality.

In his chapter, "Men, Masculinity, and the rape culture", in *Transforming a Rape Culture*, Michael Kimmel argues that "part of transforming a rape culture means transforming masculinity" (1995, 157). In the same text, Emile Buchwald argues that sexual violence is a "nonissuefor most men" (225). In *Boys and Sex,* Orenstein addresses the possible damaging implications of framing rape as an act of male desire that is inherently linked to an essentialist conceptualisation of masculinity, and which poses little or no threat to most men.Orenstein admits that when she began interviewing boys, she assumed – like Kimmel and Buchwald might – that her conversations about consent with heterosexual boys would be about exploring the boys' "own understanding (or lack of understanding) of how to understand [if] a partner had said yes" (184). At first she dismissed the boy's accounts of being victimised but then came to realise that the "notion that all guys are sexually insatiable – ever ready, incapable of refusal, regret or injury – reinforces the most retrograde idea of masculinity, the very thing the latest wave of feminism is trying to change" (185).

Although Orenstein maintains that "heterosexual men's and women's experiences with unwanted sex" (185) are not fully comparable, she acknowledges that "disregarding boys' abuse, whether by other men or by women, risks driving them toward shame and disconnection, and sets them up for potential mental health issues, as it does girls" (90). It is evident in Orenstein's similarly nuanced approach to analysing "lad culture" that she shares concerns like those expressed by Alison Phipps and Kitty Nichols, mentioned earlier in this chapter. Orenstein does not uncritically accept the argument put forth in some theoretical

approaches to proving the existence of a "rape culture", which say that rape is an inevitable product of a systemic cultural issue, like Robin Morgan's argument that "pornography is the theory, rape is the practise" (1997, 26). Instead, in her examination of sexually violent, misogynisticlanguage common to White, heterosexual "lad culture", Orenstein recognises that language can desensitise and dehumanise but can also be used without the weight of its meaning being intended or, indeed, conveyed. Orenstein considers how in some contexts boys might be denied "full emotional expression" or "trained to supress empathy" and consequently might consider cruelty as "ribbing" (jocular teasing), which could lead to them making demeaning sexual comments about women or hurtful comments about each other as a form of bonding. As Mary Becker states, "human beings, whether men, women, or children, do not flourish when hyper-masculinity is glorified and traditionally feminine qualities (such as care, care-taking, and valuing relationships) are denigrated (1999, 22).

x. Missed Opportunities?

Asking For It infers that Eli may have felt pressure not to interfere with the boys' assault on Emma. However, the reader knows Eli was sober at the party because earlier he took Fitzy's car keys from him to prevent a drunken accident. This suggests that he cannot be excused for not protecting Emma or calling out his friends' behaviour – making his behaviour all the worse. There are other moments in the text where the reader can conclude that men feel degrees of pressure that relate to stereotypical constructions of masculinity. The text suggests that Eli is adhering to a "bro-club" mentality by not stepping in to stop the others from assaulting Emma. This nuance is more readily evident in the play adaptation of *Asking For It* than in O'Neill's original text. The playscript touches on how boys can feel pressurised by gendered expectations to do with "manliness" and sexual experience. Conor says that he sees "Paul O'Brien every night in the gym", which hints at men feeling pressurised by gym culture to attain a certain kind of physique (McHugh 14). In the scene, the boys talk about sex

with bravado and defend their sexual experience. Eli mocks Sean, saying that he "shit" himself during sex (16). When Conor tries to defend Sean by saying he had never heard that story, Sean says, "that's not saying a lot. You haven't heard of much" (16). The others laugh at Conor's lack of sexual experience, making him blush in embarrassment. These aspects of the playscript, which suggest social pressure on boys to be sexually experienced, were less evident in the performance. They were a lost opportunity for the performed play to have explored how boys and men experience pressures to conform to normative gender conventions. Works like O'Neill's, which depict the "problem" of masculinity(ies), should consider how traditional conceptions of manhood affect boys today.

Because of *Asking For It*'s focus on sporting culture, it also had an opportunity to consider how conventionally masculine expectations to do with bravery, strength and dominance in the public arena (sport) might influence another more private one (sex) with greater nuance. For example, in the television series, *The Sopranos*, men characters portray themselves as dominant in public – excessively so because they are violent criminals. In one episode, the character Uncle Junior enjoys giving oral sex to his new girlfriend but swears her to secrecy about it because his fellow mobsters would see it as a sign of weakness. *Asking For It* could have considered how expectations about strength and dominance might inhibit boys' sexual agency and pleasure in a similar way.

Interestingly, there are no responses included from young adult boys in the Abbey Theatre's education pack, only girls. Maebh McHugh's adaptation, more than the book itself, does attempt to explore masculinity and to begin a discourse about male oppression and the male body as subject to many of the same pressures as women. However, the production's graphic visual treatment of male characters as animalistic sexual aggressors, as in the novel, problematises masculinity in an essentialised and reductive way. A recent review in the *Guardian* of the play's staging in Birmingham says the play "offers cliches instead of real insight" but does not elaborate on its over-presentation of girls as universally vulnerable and

boys as predators, nor the alarmingly regressive constructions of male and female sexuality that this offers (Wyver, *"Asking For It review"*).

In the novel, concepts of intersectionality are also not engaged with in a complex enough way – Whiteness and White privilege are – like in *Only Ever Yours*' description of the treatment of eves outside of the Euro Zone – touched on but not developed. The majority of characters in *Asking For It* are White and middle class. Variations of privilege are intimated by Emma's jealously of Ali's wealth and possessions, but little is made of this apart from it being a facet of Emma's drive to be "the best" and most attractive. She sees Ali as less attractive and thereby less deserving of her beautiful possessions. Jamie is Asian, and Eli is Black. Significantly, only girls (Jamie and Eli's sisters in the play adaptation) are subject to racism. The boys objectify Eli's sisters because of their "difference"; Dylan says, "no needfor fake tan on those beauties" (15). Dylan describes Jamie as "that Asian one" and talks about her and her mother in racist and sexually aggressive terms: "I'd bang her in a heartbeat.Bang them both. A mother-daughter, spicy hot bag, three-in-one" (17). For Eli, in both the book and the play adaptation, "being male is something that he has going for him, even if race or class or age or disability is going against him" (Frye 14). Both the novel and the play adaptation fail to consider men's position as subject to a spectrum of oppression, presenting them instead as a homogenous group unilaterally more privileged than all women. For change-oriented and socially-conscious literature, this is a significant omission. Being more recent, the play adaptation, in particular, could have better broached the topics related to growing awareness of intersectionality concepts. A more nuanced approach might have allowed for not only a more balanced discussion about consent but also, more broadly, a discussion around what effect a growing acceptance of gender as embodiment (something we can achieve through performing or a process of continuous modification) might have on identity and relationships for heterosexual young women and men (like the characters in the text).

The boys' behaviour in *Asking For It* is relevant to the particular sub-cultures of the text, rather than to the notion of Irish society as a whole. The detailing of "laddish" culture-specific to sport in the text – in this instance, the GAA – offers more insights. As already argued, *Asking For It* fails to explore how all people negotiate prescribed gender roles. The text too strongly suggests that the dominant idealised form of masculinity that sporting culture can promote is normalised and unanimously accepted, rather than negotiated or contested, in contemporary Irish society. Just as O'Neill's depiction of girls as devastatingly oppressed by feminine norms undermines their capacity to see the hypocrisy in these structures and negotiate and resist them, her depiction of boys as unharmed by similar social forces, is a disservice to them. It is important to remember, too, that the girl and boy characters in *Asking For It* are also – on the whole – privileged because of their national identity, class and sexual orientation. They are advantaged in terms of their gender identification, as they all identify as cis males or females (their gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth). O'Neill's works offer more complexity and subtlety concerning these aspects than her commentary outside of the text, and the majority of cultural and critical responses to the works have considered.

Peggy Orenstein notes that we recognise "that we need to have new expectations of boys, but we haven't let go of the old ones" (*Boys* 11). A recent *Esquire* story profiled the life of a White, male, American teenager navigating what Orenstein terms the "new masculinity". The cover read, "An American Boy: What it's like to grow up white, middle class, and male in the era of social media, school shootings, toxic masculinity, #MeToo, and a divided country" (Percy). The *Esquire* article quoted the teenage boy Morgan as saying, "I know what I can't do, I just don't know what I can do". This articulation of confusion highlights the difficulties surrounding expressions of sexuality and consent felt by a generation experiencing an increasing destabilisation of traditional gender roles – roles upon which the identity of role models or the foundation of individuals' identities must be based. The article

was met with criticism, some of which argued that Morgan's "average" experience was oversimplified, excluded many American boys and was decidedly not average. A response on Twitter to the article said, "Esquire dropping this ode to white male privilege that no one asked for…during Black History month is just … ugh" (@oheyjenna). Arguments about who and what should represent an "American boy" aside, the backlash of media and online comments the article received demonstrates ongoing racial and gendered tensions in America. Furthermore, it demonstrates the possibility that certain attempts to promote equality, particularly those expressed on social media platforms, are in danger of oversimplifying complex issues at the heart of modern power relations and of further entrenching binary positions and viewpoints. In the article, Morgan describes his negative experiences online when responding to "a feminist thing that said something about what men do" on social media: the woman who had written the online comment replied to his remarks with "what do you have to say? You're a white man" (Ryan qtd. in Percy, 2019). He described his confusion and stated, "doesn't she promote equal rights?" (Ryan qtd. in Percy). The article and its responses highlight the uncertainty about acceptable sexual behaviour and boundaries experienced and expressed,either explicitly or implicitly, by the young women and men in contemporary Western society.

In a speech about empathy in 2017, Sarah Maria Griffin referred to the online conversation about sexual violence as staying between a community of women. She explained that while this offers a sense of support and validation, it was in danger of becoming an echo chamber. I argue that Irish YA literature is somewhat in similar risk of becoming an echo chamber focused only on interrogating misogyny and the persecution of women and queer women at the cost of a balanced representation of others or of excluding others. As Griffin says in this tweet, it may not be women authors' job to teach men about women's history and untold stories; however, as Una Mullally has also emphasized on Twitter equality cannot happen without greater buy-in from men. In an interview for *Time*

Magazine, talking about *Boys and Sex,* Orenstein states,

> "#MeToo has created a mandate to reduce sexual violence – but it also created this opportunity to really engage boys, maybe for the first time, in these discussions about gender and sex and emotional intimacy in ways that not only reduce harm but also benefit both them and their partners" (time.com)

Unfortunately, the depiction of boys and men in O'Neill's works is more likely to exclude and diminish boys than engage them in meaningful discussions about expansive, holistic conceptions of masculinity and femininity.

xi. Conclusion

This chapter argued that O'Neill plays into stereotypes to make her point about Ireland's perceived culture of rape in *Asking For It*. The text counterproductively confirms traditional stereotypes to do with girls' vulnerability and depicts limiting ideas about violence and domination inherent to masculinity. It was argued that O'Neill's controversial text's reception and social impact represents how radical feminist thought is often unconsciously celebrated in popular culture and literature. This chapter warned against how "rape culture" is widely indiscriminately used in popular cultural discourse and in literature that purports to be progressive and feminist, like O'Neill's. This chapter argued that the representation of boys as sexually aggressive in *Asking For It* does not consider how shifting social expectations to do with femininity affects boys' negotiation of hegemonic masculinity. Fleeting moments in which the novel touches on the complexity of consent emphasise missed opportunities. Disappointingly, neither the text nor the play adaptation fulfils the works' potential to thoroughly interrogate its complex and timely subject matter and, instead, both offer a hopeless narrative around sexual violence.

Chapter Four: Feminism, Capitalist Technological Conquest and Ecology in *Only Ever Yours* and Other Contemporary Irish YA Works

i. Introduction

Only Ever Yours reveals how conventions relating to gender roles are inextricably linked not only to patriarchal concepts of femininity and beauty but also to capitalism. This chapter looks beyond O'Neill's concern with power and gender and towards the implications of power and capitalist technological (colonial) conquest in her texts more generally: the fact that human beings are commoditised by corporate entities, through the very technology that we are told is there to provide us with greater freedoms. *Only Ever Yours* concentrates on revealing contemporary society's relationship with technology and scientific advancement as detrimental to the exploitation and objectification of women's bodies. This chapter considers significant questions the text raises more generally regarding Western society's hyper-materialist nature and the development of post-human technology.

O'Neill's *Only Ever Yours* is compared with Sarah Maria Griffin's *Spare and Found Parts*. Both post-apocalyptic novels explore the intensification of capitalism and individualism in modern culture's relationship with technology and present the body as created or augmented rather than natural; however, the outcomes for each protagonist's interactions with technology as a dominant apparatus of power differ. O'Neill's non – or post-human – eves suggest that human bodies (especially women's bodies) are passive social constructions upon which technology is an obliterating socialising force. In contrast, the metamorphic power of technology represented by Griffin's human-non-human hybrid characters in *Spare and Found Parts* presents the post-human body as powerfully transformative.

Chapter Four also examines Griffin's later novel, *Other Words for Smoke*, Deirdre Sullivan's *Perfectly Preventable Deaths* and Moïra Fowley-Doyle's *All the Bad Apples*.

Exploration of the power that can be gained through knowledge of nature in these texts connects to the "material turn" in recent feminist criticism. In *Material Feminisms,* Stacy Alaimo and Susan Heckman present a collection of essays by feminist critics, including Susan Bordo, Donna Harroway and Karen Bard, that develops a theory of feminism which conceives of social identities as both constructed and real. In the three novels, identity is presented as both social and material. The protagonists harness the natural world's power and offer an embodied construction of female agency. I explore how these aspects of the texts engage with more contemporary facets of feminist thought than O'Neill's, such as material feminism and ecofeminism. This chapter examines how these authors' scope of concerns extends beyond gender-based discrimination to consider broader social justice issues, such as climate change.

Authorial voice is strongly present in these writers' examination of Ireland's history of discrimination against women. I argue that a preoccupation with paratextual elements and real-life references create a political conversation between author and reader that, like in O'Neill's novels, is often too heavy-handed. I question whether, like O'Neill, these authors mediate Irish history through a feminist lens with a moral indignation that leaves little room for the reader to interpret the texts as works of literature.

ii. Surveillance Capitalism in *Only Ever Yours*

Only Ever Yours is concerned with offering wholly pessimistic, yet discerning, observations about what it might feel like to be a teenage girl growing up in a heavily digitised and media-driven age. The schooling that the eves receive critiques current social realities for many young women. The eves, who have grown up in a totalitarian digital age in which books are a thing of the past and all learning takes place through devices, could be described as "digital natives". The term was used by education consultant Mark Prensky in his article entitled "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants" (2001) to argue that "the arrival and rapid

dissemination of digital technology in the last decade of the 20th century" effected a radical change in how children learn (1). Prensky's argument is predicated on the assumption that the generation born into a digitised world possess an ease with technology comparable to that of a child's ability to learn his/her native tongue. He contends that traditional modes of education are no longer effective because "students today are all 'native speakers' of computers, video gamesand the internet" (1). His description of reading, writing, maths and logical thinking as "legacy content" and his understanding of how they work in a digital/multimodal age is simplistic and concerning. For "digital natives" to excel academically, he argues, they wouldneed "future content" (5). He describes this future content of education as largely, and inevitably, digital and technological and proposes that educators teaching "digital natives" ought to "invent computer games to do the job, even for the most serious content" (3). Prensky correctly identifies the transformative power of digital technologies. Nevertheless, even in an era in which distance learning has become an unprecedented 'norm' because of the COVID-19 pandemic, his uncritical acceptance of technological inevitability is deeply problematic.

Viewed from the perspective of Shoshana Zuboff's convictions about the individual, organisational, and social consequences of the rise of the digital, and its relationship to the history and future of capitalism, Prensky's zeitgeisty terminology takes on a darker edge. Framed by her understanding of "surveillance capitalism", Zuboff describes the term "digital native" as a "tragically ironic phrase" (qtd. in Naughton, 2019). The new variant of capitalism that Zuboff defines uses technology to provide free services (Google, Facebook) that enable the provider to monitor the behaviour of its users, often without their consent, for capitalist gain. Zuboff compares the structure of colonial conquest that saw Columbus claim the Caribbean islands from its natives by "simply declaring the lands as territory of the Spanish monarchy and the pope" with the activities of the first surveillance capitalists who also "conquered by declaration" and "simply declared our private experience to be theirs for

the taking" (qtd. in Naughton). Considered in this way, "digital natives" are colonised by the digital age, rather than evolved by it.

In *Only Ever Yours*, the digitised world of the text is always depicted as impeding rather than enhancing the eves' lives. It is portrayed as part of the larger, heavily propagandised media that the eves are exposed to – described by freida as "flickering images anaesthetizing us into silence" (125). Similar to the "digital natives" Prentsky described, the eves experience their world through screens, "ePad's" and social media platforms like "MyFace". freida describes how her interest as a child in "ancient picture books" was unusual among her peers who "never wanted them, preferring the interactive ePad games" (55). In the "ancient picture books" freida liked as a child, she read about "princess sparkles" an interactive toy that could speak phrases like "*Math is hard. Wanna go shopping?*" (55). In freida's dystopian world's ancient past, technology was already being used to disseminate gender bias and patriarchal values. However, the extremes it reached by the time freida was a child meant that women were dispossessed of the opportunity to understand what math was, never mind conceive of themselves to be naturally worse at it than men. These details convey how essential differences are projected through every aspect of culture and learning that the eves – and by extension, young people in the real world – are exposed to. They also suggest that the eves' relationship with technology is a central factor in their oppression.

Discussing the reality that he believes Zuboff has deftly illuminated, journalist John Naughton describes how digital technology separates citizens in societies into "two groups: the watchers (invisible, unknown and unaccountable) and the watched" (qtd. in Naughton). The society of *Only Ever Yours* is structured in this way: males dominate; they are the "watchers"who hold all of the information and, therefore, the power. Women are controlled; they are the"watched", who are denied information and power. Since they were small children, the eves have been photographed and their images have been posted to the school's website. They are then ranked by the public, including the male children born in the same

year as them (the Inheritants) in a vote. The results are uploaded and made public. In their final year these boyscome to the school to select their favourite eve as a companion, even though the eves have never seen them. freida's discomfort, evident when she thinks, "we have grown so accustomed to being seen but never seeing in return" suggests more than the asymmetry of power at work in her society. Her unease reveals how the dislocated nature of online communication can affect young people's interpersonal skills (128). freida's reference to being more experienced at being "seen" than "seeing" relates to young people's tireless introspective cultivation of online image, which can result in their discomfort in social situations where they must actively "see" others.

iii. Social Media in *Only Ever Yours*

At "The School", each eve sleeps in a separate cell and is forbidden from visiting others. Alone in their cells, the eves "connect" online through "Video Chat" and instant messaging. This physical separation works as a metaphor for how social media, despite its facility to create a feeling of connectedness, often results in the opposite: feelings of extreme isolation. When the eves are together, the addictive nature of their relationship with technology is such that face-to-face exchanges are continuously interrupted by interactions with their devices. Despite occupying the same physical space, they are disconnected. The impact of this on personal bonds between the eves proves destructive to freida's friendship with isabel.

Friends since they were "hatched", the girls share a special closeness that allows freida to be more open and at ease with isabel than with the other eves, by whom she feels criticised and judged. isabel, the most beautiful of the eves, has held the position of "#1 eve" for years. As the eves' final year begins, she becomes increasingly withdrawn. Stuck in a cycle of self-harm, binge eating and purging, isabel gains weight, falls from favour, and becomes socially isolated. freida doesn't know that isabel has gained the unwanted sexual attentions of "The Father". When isabel is bullied by the other eves, the emotionally

challenging situation proves too much for freida. Her lack of experience with difficult social interactions sees her unable to successfully communicate with isabel. freida is used to the comfort of social remove that allows the eves to "make comparisons constantly…protected behind the anonymity of our computers" (80). She does not have the self-esteem to say what she really thinks, nor the empathy to fully consider isabel's point of view. Instead, she is consumed by feelings of jealousy and hurt that result in her joining in with the eves' abuse of isabel rather than defend her. The eves' use of "MyFace" to anonymously and viscously troll isabel portrays the extremes of how social media can be used today to judge and criticise from the vantage point of social remove. isabel receives dozens of anonymous messages. One states, "no one likes you. Everyone wants you to die. Why don't you just kill yourself and get it over with?" (120). Another, "you are lazy and vile and the ugliest eve ever" (120). When Megan posts a video of isabel binging and purging, freida imagines the other eves' response, "ecstatic horror in their eyes, updating MyFace statuses on their eFones almost involuntarily, words whispering. *Disgusting… Obsolete… Worthless …Sickened …*" (136).

Devices and social media are similarly shown to affect the eves' connection to self. freida is continuously distracted from self-reflection or pursuits that might develop her character by scrolling through platforms and newsfeeds intended to represent Snapchat, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram: "All we seem to do is burn through the hours between Organised Recreation sessions as fast as we can, listening to celebrity gossip on Artificial.com or updating our MyFace photos" (56). These distractions play an aggressive role in contributing to freida's feelings of depression, anxiety, poor body image, and loneliness. freida never attempts to establish an identity beyond what is socially accepted as popular. She uploads the same songs as everyone else and she keeps her own interests private. Even her lifelong friendship with isabel cannot transcend the social barrier of isabel's deviation from the norm.

There are parts of *Only Ever Yours* that do more to subvert traditional heterosexual

normative narratives than O'Neill's other works. *Asking For It* depicts narrow, restricted social space within which Emma can experiment with her genuine sexual desires, but its narrative structure communicates predominantly heteronormative assumptions. The possibility of freida's love for isabel being more than friendship (or at least freida's potential desire to explore her sexuality) in *Only Ever Yours* is implied throughout various sections of the text and is arguably another factor in freida's disintegration. Irrespective of the overarching patriarchal power structure, the eves' and freida's interactions with social media are the driving force behind her psychological deterioration. As the narrative develops, her body increasingly becomes a locus for self-hatred and her understanding of self becomes completely unstable and fragmented. Social media plays so strong a role in this deterioration that it can clearly be understood as upholding social norms and maintaining the status quo independent of the novel's consistent depiction of it as a tool of male control.

iv. The Optimized Self in *Only Ever Yours*

Despite her extreme efforts, the image of perfection freida presents online is never quite attainable in real life. This proves exhausting and damaging to her self-esteem. Like the other eves, freida tirelessly and self-consciously cultivates her image to meet the standards of her society. Her routine includes extreme dieting and exercise, rigorous and painful beauty regimes, endless reapplication of makeup, and posing for photographs to upload online. Every morning, freida's computerised "Personal Stylist Programme" asks "how do you want to improve yourself today?" (12). After scrolling through "MyFace", freida paces her room "with barely contained anxiety" pulling pose after pose in an effort to get the best "foto": "a foto of me reclining in my bed. A foto of me in high-waisted PVC leggings and a cropped top. A foto of me in a metallic silver bikini" (71). In this way, the text explores the contemporary notion of presenting your "best self" or "best life" and demonstrates the contradictions at work within the language of self-improvement and self-care. In order to be

your “best self”, your real self requires continuous work and upkeep, none of which should be admitted to or shown in public. The Internet and social media provide a way for the eves to make easy boasts and present false ideals. Depictions of these types of interactions with technology and social networking in the text suggests their role in aggravating feelings of worthlessness and social alienation and in increasing the pressure of the already difficult process of adolescent development.

The text’s society functions in accordance with social Darwinism in that it champions the “survival of the fittest” and competition. freida’s hope for the future, like most of her peers, is to become a companion. Those eves deemed “naturally fittest” (those most beautiful and pleasing to the men in power) are chosen to become companions, bear sons, and ensure a “better” future for the population. The lesser women will become either a concubine or a chastity, depending on how their sexual attractiveness is judged by the male hierarchy. The eves are told this will depend upon “how attractive” they look to the Inheritants and how well they perform in “certain challenges and tests” (128). If two Inheritants favour the same eve, the “highest ranking Inheritant will have first choice” (128). The Inheritants are ranked according to their social power not their physically attractiveness – although, interestingly, Darwin like all of O’Neill’s attractive men characters, is described in accordance with traditional Western standards of masculine appeal. Nevertheless, the text’s social orders are based on power attained by connection or an accident of birth, not competence. Consequently, the text invokes Darwin’s theory of evolution, as feminist theorists have, in order to critique biological essentialism and the gendered hierarchies and commonly accepted ‘norms’ it maintains. This link is emphasised by naming the text’s central male character “Darwin”.

freida’s efforts to win Darwin’s affections and become “#1 eve” are a small-scale representation of the larger struggle to survive in the text. From small children the eves are pitted against their “sisters” and this competition continues into adolescent and adult life. As

companions, women compete in violent reality-shows named "*Euro-Wives versus Americas-Wives*" (37) and "*Battle to the Death*" (69). Although these titles echo the exaggerated tone of contemporary reality-television shows, in this dystopian setting it is likely that they are forthright. Aspects of the text like this demonstrate what little value is placed on women in the society of the text and suggest a real-life comparison. The punishing competitive nature of the dystopian society reflects the extreme self-conditioning processes that many people undertake as part of their efforts to achieve and demonstrate success in contemporary consumerist society. O'Neill's intention may be that the designed eves function as a warning for the reader about the effects of misogynistic patriarchy on girls' self-image; however, their efforts to achieve a fantasy of self says more about the effects of the optimized self, as an object of capitalist coercion, on all human beings.

In *Selfie: How the West Became Self-Obsessed* (2017), British journalist Will Storr describes an era of hyper-individualism in the contemporary Western world. Storr describes anxiety provoked by efforts to present a perfect life on social media. In *Only Ever Yours* the extreme dangers of trying to achieve a model self are only experienced by women and girls, which is not in accordance with real life. *Only Ever Yours* disregards men's suffering despite research, such as Storrs', which shows that a growing number of men feel negatively about their bodies because they think that they are not muscular enough. However, the text's depiction of the central role that social media can play in promoting feelings of inadequacy about appearance or achievement can logically be applied to all people – despite O'Neill's best efforts to frame girls' suffering as most important.

v. Apocalyptic Post-humanism in *Only Ever Yours*

Anita Tarr and Donna R. White term Francis Fukuyama's theory of posthumanism "apocalyptic posthumanism" because of its "alarmist views about the disastrous future" an abuse of biotechnology could lead to (xii). In *Our Posthuman Future* (2002) Fukuyama

argued that "political control" of genetic engineering and biotechnology would have a destructive impact on the future of humanity. *Only Ever Yours* advances a similar line of argument but political control is only affected on women's bodies. The fluid boundary between the fictional world and the real world, evident to varying degrees in all dystopia, is intentionally exaggerated in *Only Ever Yours* to provoke comparison between the dystopian "designed" women and the possible effects of technological and scientific advance on the bodies of real women – particularly concerning sexuality and reproduction.

Freida, or #630, and the other eves are all designed equally in accordance to male standards of beauty. Many of the vigorous "improvements" that maintain and increase the eves' beauty are medical or scientific. The nature of the eves' design works to demonstrate concerns around one of the goals of technology: automating humans. Significantly, however, only women's physical bodies are enhanced. On seeing the Inheritants for the first time freida notes "the uniformity" of the eves' "perfection" in comparison to them and thinks it is "funny to see differences in their heights and weights and facial features" (129). To survive in the text's dystopian society, all women must follow the rules: be beautiful; be sexually appealing; be subservient; be young. To defy them would result in a lobotomised existence aiding the "research" of the "engineers', "*You know what we do with girls who break the rules, don't you? We send them Underground*" (389/390). Or, if they can no longer comply because they become too old/ too fat/ too ugly they will be given a "complete redesign".

Only Ever Yours offers a dystopian vision of a scientifically enhanced female body that, although extreme, is not far removed from "real-world" practices and research in the areas of human enhancement and preservation of life. Mark O'Connell explores current research and development in these areas in *To Be A Machine* (2017). O'Connell investigates "transhumanism": a movement aimed at overcoming human limitations using sophisticated science and technology. From a humanist perspective, he considers advances in AI (artificial intelligence) and the efforts of cryogenics to "upload" minds and preserve life. He reports

that many leading scientific thinkers and people in positions of cultural power agree that significant advances concerning the merging of human consciousness with technology will occur in the near future. However, they disagree as to whether these advances will represent the ultimate in human evolution or the enslavement and annihilation of the species. For O'Connell, both possibilities pose horror. He argues that the concept of accomplishing your "best self" through an interaction with machines is characteristic of the intensification of capitalism and individualism in modern culture's relationship with technology. He expresses concern that such extreme investment in advancing oneself could ultimately lead to the "self" being consumed by technology, which would obliterate any humanist understanding of selfhood.

O'Connell notes that the people chiefly discussing the societal shift that the "coming transfiguration of the human condition" may pose are "an overwhelmingly male group" (loc. 315). The significance of this is magnified in *Only Ever Yours* where all those in positions of real power are male. O'Neill's text applies the threat of this specific kind of scientific advancement (the ownership of which is chiefly male) to the female experience and the future of women and girls. *Only Ever Yours* embodies O'Connell's humanist concerns from a radical feminist perspective, by emphasising how technological and scientific advancement result in the exploitation of women's bodies.

The control strategies that are applied to the fictional women's genetic make-up, sex organs, and capacity to give birth are intended to reflect those that stem from socially constructed ideas of what women's bodies should look like and how they should function. According to Donna Mitchell, the text's representation of the eves as "posthuman gothic entities", scientifically designed to possess exceptional levels of physical perfection, exemplifies "issues of oppressed femininity and unnatural creations" and works as social critique and commentary on the intersection between the female figure and patriarchal figures (1). Undoubtedly, the texts concentrate on patriarchal oppression; so much so that they miss

the opportunity to fully explore other oppressive structures. The representation of women in the text as "post-human" works to critique modern Western society's obsession with youth and beauty and the promotion in much popular culture and media of the concept of the human body as a high-performance machine that requires continued enhancements and renovations – most especially if that body is female.

Mass culture is created for the eves by the governing men who are affected by it only in terms of reaping economic, social and political reward. In this way, the impact of mass media and advertising's portrayal of the body as requiring continued enhancements on men is largely ignored. Furthermore, O'Neill's text largely disregards the extent to which women, particularly in the fashion/publishing industries, such as Tyra Banks, in *Top Model*, and Alexandra Schulman, at *British Vogue*, may be the creators and/or vanguards of some of our Western beauty standards who benefit greatly from sustaining them. *Only Ever Yours*' overt engagement with Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*, written in 1991, does not consider Wolf's revised argument, made in a *Washington Post* article in 2011, in which she addresses the "Ageing Myth". Wolfe's criticism touches on the significant pressure on young men to conform to a (supplement-focused) commercially driven Western construction of the male body, O'Neill misses the opportunity to acknowledge it entirely. This further highlights the blinkered approach to technologies of beauty and consumerism in *Only Ever Yours*. Of further concern in both O'Neill's text and Wolf's criticism is the implications of a presentation of women, enslaved to both the beauty and the ageing myth, and particularly vulnerable to being removed from gaining the type of insight outlined by Plato in his assertion that in order to gain a relationship with the truth it was essential to confront death. Nevertheless, the aesthetic medications and procedures the eves use provides an undeniably effective representation of the anti-ageing and improvement messages from cosmetic companies and cosmetic procedures trying to reverse the ageing process that many people still feel pressured to use.

The possibilities and opportunities for human enhancement in *Only Ever Yours* are surprisingly limited. Despite scientists' ability to enhance women's physical bodies and to create technologies and medications that control them, this same scientific ability is not applied to enhancing the physical ability or mental capacity of either the eves or the men who created them. Limiting the application of scientific processes of human enhancement to women's bodies in this way negates the existence of far greater influences on how such possibilities would be manipulated, such as wealth. Surely, if scientists discover the means to enhance women's physical beauty as they have in the dystopian world of the novel, they might also discover the means of enhancing physical ability or intellect. If this were the case, a truly radical inequality would likely emerge not between men and women but between those who have wealth and power – and who can access superior physical ability or intellect as a result – and those who do not.

Even if the capacity for human augmentation in the novel were limited to the enhancement of physical beauty, it is questionable whether men would only want to apply that power to women. Although men are seemingly immune to hierarchies of beauty that the eves are painfully diminished by, Darwin is clearly the "number one" Inheritant because of his looks as well as his social status as The Father's son. His physicality and attractiveness align entirely with the kind of aesthetically narrow Western beauty standards and rigid gender conventions that are everywhere else heavily criticized in relation to women. Darwin is described as "wearing a short-sleeved T-shirt that shows off his muscular arms" and as having "stubble shadowing his chin" – both markers of conventional masculinity (130). When freida first sees him, she feels "dizzy" thinking, "he's handsome and rich and is destined to become one of the most powerful men in the Euro-Zone" (130). Characterising the novel's most desirable Inheritant as rich and powerful as well as conventionally handsome reinforces rather than problematises traditionalist notions about men's attractiveness for women.

v. Technology, Consumerism and Media

The eves' constant interaction with technology and media reminds the reader of the increasing reality of modern society's "prosthetic relationship with the world… where so many things are experienced as an extension of our bodies" and suggests how this relationship affects adolescents (O'Connell, loc. 958). However, social media and technology can provide a platform for sharing alternative images and narratives around bodies (of all sexes and genders) that work to deconstruct damaging ideals and broaden concepts of beauty. In *Only Ever Yours*, this capacity to provide a platform for previously marginalised voices and expose capitalist systems of oppression is not acknowledged. The version of female identity, reimagined and reformed to align with naturally unattainable standards of beauty, represented by the eves reflects Susan Bordo's observation of the "new postmodern imagination of human freedom from bodily determination" in *Unbearable Weight* (245). Bordo argues that the very technology that was created to fix malfunctioning body parts has generated "an industry and an ideology fuelled by fantasies of rearranging, transforming and correcting" – to the extent that in place of the material body "we now have cultural plastic" (245-46). According to Bordo, popular culture fortifies these ideals, telling the consumer that regardless of inequalities, they can have the perfect body (247). The message dispensed by many aspects of popular culture – advertising, media, fashion, celebrity, cosmetic surgery, and the bombardment of "gym bodies" on social media – is much like the message the eves receive: "you must take the necessary steps to improve yourself. There is always room for improvement" (53). The eves who succeed in taking the "necessary steps" to overcome their "flaws" gain the greatest social power available to them: the status of companion (53).

In its portrayal of the eves' competition to gain this status, the text shares similarities with Mark Greif's description of the twenty-first-century's "total aesthetic environment" in his critical essay "The Concept of Experience" (2016). This environment, in the world's

affluent nations, is outlined by Greif as one "where you choose your paint colours…and extreme makeovers, and facial surgery, in the debased aestheticism called *consumerism*, to make yourself by buying" (93). What freida sees when she looks at herself in the mirror symbolizes the dislocated sense of self that can result from such extreme consumerist self-conditioning. She thinks, "this face is my worth, my value. This face is all that I have and it isn't even mine" (303). The implicit emphasis in the text on consumerism demonstrates capitalist society's role in sustaining these repressive ideas and in dulling critical thinking about directives to behave, dress, act, and feel a certain way. To a certain extent, *Only Ever Yours* offers the young reader the opportunity to see and critique these social ills at the most criticaltime of his/her self-development, adolescence, so that they might, as Mark Greif argues people ought to, create themselves "by seeing" rather than "by buying" (93).

Of additional interest to what is explicitly implied in *Only Ever Yours* about women's oppression, is what is implied about the fragmentation of human identity and the implications for selfhood in a capitalist society increasingly led by scientific and technological advancements that seek to overcome human limitation. The destruction of female identity portrayed in the text aligns with Donna J Haraway's theory of the "painful fragmentation" of female identity that has made the "concept of *woman* elusive" and created an excuse for the "matrix of women's dominations of each other" (1991, 17). In her *A Cyborg Manifesto,* Haraway uses the metaphor of the cyborg to describe the "disassembled and reassembled postmodern collective and personal self… the self feminists must code" (33). Haraway recognises scientific advancement as inevitable: "our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselvesare frighteningly innert"(10). She considers progress from a feminist standpoint and her concerns echo O'Connell's humanist apprehensions. Considering a "cyborg world", she outlines two possible perspectives. She offers the positive possibility of "lived social and bodily realities in which people are … not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints" (15). She reasons that if nothing is "natural", but rather

constructed like a cyborg, then everything can be reconstructed. However, she shares O'Connell's concern that progress in areas of automation and robotics are indicative of the increasingly corporate, dehumanising capitalist world. *Only Ever Yours*' genetically designed eves and female avatars serve as a metaphor for this relationship between modern culture and technology, progress and capitalism.

The eves are educated to create their identities by simulating what they see in the media they consume. They do this through their visual aesthetic and the images that they upload to social media. Their entire social experience is mediated: they understand their bodies, their experiences and their relationships in terms of how they compare to what they see in the media. This creates a dislocation of the self from reality. The presentation of the eves as simulated or post-human women represents an extreme depiction of Jean Baudrillard's concept of postmodern, media-driven, capitalist society in *Simulcra and Simulation* (1994). The eves are simulated women who create simulated self-identities based upon the simulations of femininity that they see on their screens. In this way, they represent the fragmented nature of modern culture's obsession with visual images and mass consumerism, in which distinctions between replications of reality and reality itself are blurred.

The eves are an extreme manifestation of women as objects. Their design provokes discussion around the future of human intimacy and sexual relationships. The role of the sex avatars in the text offers direct comparisons with the relationship between the growing AI and sex robot industries and the exploitation and objectification of women. The eves are adolescents but any potential to explore sexual pleasure or orientation is smothered by the rules that govern their lives. The rules for "proper sexual conduct" are learned by the eves, as it is – it is intimated – by many real-life adolescents, through watching porn. The text's less obvious suggestion of how advancements in technology in the area of human relationships can create social distance, alienation and estrangement are more interesting and

contemporary than its more direct damning of porn as violence explored in earlier chapters.

vii. The Post-human Body in *Only Ever Yours* and *Spare and Found Parts*

Like O'Neill's *Only Ever Yours*, Sarah Maria Griffin's *Spare and Found Parts* imagines a dystopian near-distant future. *Only Ever Yours* is set in the wake of a global nuclear fall-out; while, *Spare and Found Parts*, is set during a national – possibly global – epidemic. Griffin's protagonist Nell lives in "The Pale" where people are recovering from the "toxic electromagnetic pulses" of "the Turn" a few years earlier (13). Computers, which brought about the epidemic, are banned: "all code is blasphemy" (12). People in the city – or "The Pale" – are healing: fewer babies are born "with missing parts" and augmentation and prothesis have become commonplace, even fashionable; kinetic limbs are "part statement, part function" (17). Nell is among a generation of apprentices who must "contribute to the healing" of those in the Pale. If she makes a good contribution, she can go to live with the healed in the country, "The Pasture". The novel opens with Nell searching for "pieces of the old city" at the beach where a "hand without a body" reaches out "for someone to grab it" (14). The hand symbolises the potential that Nell sees in technology. Aware that machines could think before the Turn, Nell sets about making "a soul" out of "spare and found parts" for her contribution (40). She thinks, "what could be more human than building something new, more human than making life?" (39). Griffin offers a different take on the ethical questions surrounding AI and scientific advancement to O'Neill.

Both novels explore the natural world and body as subsumed, destroyed or unnaturally altered as a consequence of neoliberal global, capitalist corporations. In *Spare and Found Parts*, technology is presented as an insidious force that has been instrumental in the destruction of society long before the advent of the epidemic. Computers are described as having "ruptured how people speak to one another" and "torn away the stitching" of how society works (loc.453). Similarly, in *Only Ever Yours*, technology is used as a tool of

surveillance and public ranking that is far more detrimental to the scientifically engineered eves than the natural disaster that predicated their existence. In *Only Ever Yours*, the non- – orpost-human – eves are designed and powerless. In *Spare and Found Parts*, Nell has a mechanical heart; others have augmented exteriors, such as limbs or jaws. At the beginning of the novel, her status as the only person "with all their metal inside" makes her feel freakish and uncomfortable. Eventually, however, the extreme nature of her human/non-human hybridity allows her to see the potential in technology and to become the designer rather than the designed. Nell harnesses technology to make a sentient being. Her experience emphasises women's capacity to gain control within a male-dominated area, as well as importantly, the human capacity to harness technology's transformative potential for good rather than harm. O'Neill presents developments in science and technology as driving forces behind an increasing dislocation of identity that is particularly detrimental to young girls. Comparatively, the relationship between the human body and technology in *Spare and Found Parts* presents the body as a source of potential, rather than a passive disembodied entity controlled by social conditioning and male domination.

viii. Eco-and-Material Feminism

Alice Curry describes eco-critical concerns as "rooted in the critical insight that environmental crisis is a feminist issue" (2013, 1). Although environmental issues are not dominant themes in *Only Ever Yours* or *Spare and Found Parts*, both texts deal with the apocalyptic aftereffects of extreme urbanization and technological advancement on nature and the human body. In Griffin's later text, *Other Words for Smoke*, climate concerns are more discernibly bound up with feminist issues: Griffin makes connections between patriarchy and the legacy of violence against women inIreland and violence against the planet. This is similarly the case in the two other works of magical realism I discuss here, Deirdre Sullivan's *Perfectly Preventable Deaths* and Moïra Fowley Doyle's *All the Bad Apples*. Exploration of feminist issues, such as the silencing of women and the maltreatment

of the female body, is of primary interest to these authors. However, connections between feminist issues and ecological concerns operating at a subtlerlevel in the texts appeal for a greater ecological consciousness in Irish society. Featuring a strong sense of emotional engagement with the material world, these novels construct humanidentity in relation to nature and magic. An ecofeminist ideological stance is expressed in thetexts by challenges made against the concept of nature as an agentless female object, which posit an interconnectedness with nature as a "thing-in-itself" rather than a "thing-for-us", as laid out in ecofeminist thought (Legler 1993, 45).

The young women protagonists in these three texts struggle against dominant real and supernatural male forces and come to understand the lengthy tradition of women's oppression in their community or family. In *Other Word for Smoke*, twins, Mae and Rossa, spend the summer in their aunt Rita's house, which is haunted by the malevolent male spirit, Sweet James. Sweet James feeds on young women's pain and personifies Ireland's religious control of women. Religious symbolism throughout the novel is forewarning of the twins' discovery about the part that the Magdalene Laundries (institutions run by Catholic orders in which unmarried pregnant women were forced to work) have played in their aunt's life. Statues of the Virgin Mary appear in the house "as though they'd sprung up there, like mushrooms" (710). Rita's friends, who were in love as young teenage girls, were separated when one girl became pregnant. It is implied that Sweet James's haunting of Rita's house was caused by the suffering inflicted by the Catholic church on young girls, like Rita's friend: "The wrong of it tore a cut in things. That's how it happens. Pain opens the world, and things come through" (274). Mae and Rossa's aunt prays that Sweet James "doesn't eat" Bevan – Rita's young witchapprentice whom Sweet James influences to perform evil acts of witchcraft. Sweet James is asymbol of consumption and patriarchal domination, like Lon – a monstrous figure, responsible for years of violation against women – in Sullivan's *Perfectly Preventable Deaths*.

Sullivan's novel tells the story of Madeline and her sixteen-year-old twin, Caitlin, who move from the Irish city of Cork to the small isolated village of Ballyfran, where Caitlin falls in love with an older man, Lon, who Caitlin suspects is implicated in the mysterious disappearances of young girls from the area. This creates a divide between the sisters, causing great upset for Madeline, which is exacerbated by the emergence of her growing capacity for witchcraft and her dawning realisation that Ballyfran is a dangerous place. Like Sweet James in *Other Word for Smoke*, Lon dominates and exploits the natural commodities of the land – young women. In Griffin's novel Mae and Bevan's combined powers allow them to overcome Sweet James. In Sullivan's text Lon is destroyed by Madeline's and her teacher (an older, more experienced witch) Mamó's collaborative witchcraft, symbolising an emancipation from patriarchal domination. In both novels, the protagonists use magic as an alternative to the legacy of domination and violence against women symbolically represented by Sweet James and Lon.

In Fowley-Doyle's text *All The Bad Apples*, discussed in Chapter Two, witches and magic similarly symbolise resistance and the harnessing of female power. Teenager Deena comes to understand her experience of being shamed by her father because of her sexuality as part of her family's "curse", handed down to women from generation to generation. Her sister Mandy's disappearance sets Deena on a search, during which she visits former Magdalene Laundry sites and learns about how women in her family have been mistreated concerning their sexual and reproductive rights for generations. Significantly, in each text, the supernatural is always set alongside the practical and the concrete, emphasising what is really 'magical': the transformative power of knowledge. Madeline comes to realise in Sullivan's novel, that "the more you know, the more that you can do to make things right" (2). Deena in *All The Bad Apples* has a similar realisation: the way to "break the curse" in her family is for her to "tell the story" – that if you "speak your truth", you can "shatter the stigma" (329). Both authors connect knowledge with power by presenting awareness of

social injustice as the first step towards effecting change.

Attention to the natural, material world in these texts resonates with how feminist theory increasingly takes the physicality of the body into account to reframe social identities. According to Stacey Alaimo and Susan Heckman, material feminism does not discount the merits of the previous "linguistic turn". Rather, feminist theory can – by following Bard's goal of articulating how "matter comes to matter" – "incorporate the material and the discursive, the human and the non-human, the natural and the cultural, while challenging thedichotomies and the givenness of categories" (11).

The physicality of the body and the natural world – the very "stuff" of bodies – is taken into account in each of these novels in a way that is reflective of the "material turn" in feminist theory (Alaimo, Heckman 6). A material feminist perspective is communicated by the centrality of agency and embodiment in constructions of identity and treatment of the body. In *Other Words For Smoke*, teenage protagonist Mae's experience of her material body is simultaneously described in mundane detail and with empowering reverence. Her period may make Mae's body "an inconvenient sore knot", but when the slightly older teenage Bevan reframes the experience by saying, "can you believe we can bleed for days and stay alive? Women are, like, miraculous" Mae and, by extension, the reader, can understand the materiality of the natural body as a source of potential and power (106).

Celebration of the material world and the natural body, though not immediately apparent as the main theme in Sullivan's *Perfectly Preventable Deaths,* is, on closer inspection, evident throughout. The prominence of nature-based descriptive language in the text grounds the reader firmly in the natural world, like Madeline, who "grounds" herself in things that she "can touch, that grow, and live" (loc. 2542). Details about natural remedies and poisons are threaded throughout the text's structure with the effect that the reader finishes the book having acquired some of the "real-life magic power" (knowledge) that Madeline gains through her understanding of the natural world (2). Each chapter opens with

the name of a natural herb and details of how it can be used for healing or hurting in relation to the narrative content of the chapter. For example, Chapter Thirty-Nine in which Madeline finds her sister, Caitlin, after she has been terribly wounded in a violent attack carried out by Lon, is entitled "Black Hellebore", with the sub-information, "narcotic, poisons the heart" (284).

Nature also features heavily in the narrative voice of the text. When Madeline cries in upset, her tears are described as "fat as ticks crawling down her face" (loc. 4312). To feel better, Madeline goes to the garden to press her "hands into the damp earth and breathe" her way "back to safety" (loc. 4388). Madeline's interior thoughts, which convey both her need for contact with nature and her appreciation and reverie for it, strongly communicate that the future well-being of humankind is founded in its appreciation and nurturing of natural resources: "I think about the soft green things that grow. The hot small lives that teem under the earth and only wake when we are asleep" (loc. 4397). This is further suggested by Madeline's coming to understand the world around her, her sexuality, her power, and her agency, through her knowledge of the natural world (loc. 2542). Her innate impulse to gather natural items, such as the "little grains and leaves" she places inside her pockets to give her strength, lead her to an apprenticeship as a witch that sees her come to the realisation that "as you gather knowledge you can amend" the world (loc. 2451). Madeline's harnessing of power from plants and natural objects advances ecofeminist arguments, which say that the construction of nature narratives are intricately related to the textual construction of identity, and that the breaking down of dichotomies between nature and culture challenges dichotomies between the self and other, as well as dichotomies of power (Legler 1993).

Reading *Only Ever Yours* and *Spare and Found Parts* alongside these more recent works, suggests how feminist theory, regarding relationships between people, the natural world, and gendering are increasingly relevant to the criticism of works of YA literature.

Roberta Seelinger Trites applies ecofeminist thought to her exploration of the connections between the exploitation and domination of female bodies in feminist works of twenty-first-century YA literature and the devastation of the natural world as a result of climate change. She advocates for material feminist beliefs, which say that to understand gendering we must pay attention to the material world, to be applied to the study of children's and YA literatures (2020). Applying ecofeminist and material feminist concepts to the works of YA fiction focused on here, broadens out the novels' themes of social justice in parallel with environmental justice. The feminist activist energy expressed by these Irish women writers can be understood as addressing both gender and ecological exploitation by examining connections between the oppression of women and the domination of nature. Analysing the texts in this way reveals their capacity to encourage a sense of social justice in young people that would see them understand climate change as a human rights issue and not just a scientific one – thus making it a more tangible threat worthy of activism. Interpreting these authors' works of YA fiction as I do here, highlights the significant role that they could potentially play in emphasising climate change as an intersectional, feminist issue. Making the connection between feminist issues and climate change could help the young people these novels reach to see the intersectionality of these social struggles. It could also help to develop their reader's sense of individual responsibility in relation to the environment and harness their ability to instigate change – a faculty that has been proved by their level of engagement in feminist activism in recent years. As previously mentioned in this dissertation, Ireland's Eighth Amendment, which recognised the life of the unborn as equal to the pregnant person's, was repealed in May of 2018. Writing for *The Irish Independent* in the wake of the repeal vote in 2018, Cormac Mc Quinn stated, "almost ninety percent of voters under the age of twenty-five voted 'yes' to repeal the amendment". He quotes TD, Paul Murphy, as saying that 'the victory was driven by young people and women, by a "youth quake" and a "gender quake"'. Irish YA literature increasingly reimagines gender and

futuresfor young women that resist and reject social constraints. The text examined here indicate how Irish YA fiction progressively resists the inclination to frame social justice issues, such as gender inequality, within overly simplified binary constructions of power – like that represented in O'Neill's work – thereby placing the responsibility for change on everyone.

ix. Dichotomies of Power and Identity

Sullivan, Griffin and Fowley-Doyle depict all people as capable of abusing power. Griffin's *Other Words for Smoke* emphasises the role of women in running Laundries by describing them as holy prisons "run by nuns," (273). After telling Bevan that she ran away because she would otherwise have been "put away" in a Laundry for being queer, Audrey places blame on the nuns, describing them as "monsters" (274). Teenage girl Bevan – albeit under the influence of Sweet James – is capable of great cruelty. Rita describes her as "eating the sorrow" of their guests, "inhaling it like smoke" (259).

In Sullivan's novel, some descriptions of Lon tread dangerously close to adhering with aspects of contemporary radical feminist rhetoric that crosses the line from attacks on sexism to attacks on men. Each time we see Lon he is reading a different novel by a male, White, American author – a detail that emphasises the historical dominance of the male, White author in the literary canon. One bitingly sarcastic line describes how, "suddenly, like an unexpected dick-pic, there Lon is, spread across the back seat of the bus, reading Bukowski"(loc. 4144). Although efforts to deconstruct gendered binaries in Sullivan's text, such as associations between women, nature and passivity, come close, at times, to entrenching others, such as the association of men with inherent violent capabilities, these are largely outweighed by depictions of agency as unfettered by any one characteristic alone, such as gender. One such section emphasises the universal human capacity for good and bad. When Madeline looks at her own hand, she notices "the gape of bone that strains beneath the skin. So many horrors underneath the surface of a person. So many things that

we can choose to be" (242). In this way, the construction of identity in Sullivan's and Griffin's texts speak to the "destruction of self/other opposition, and the greater inclusivity" that Peter C. Kunze argues allows children's literature to "facilitate ecofeminist ends" by adhering to 'the "emancipatory strategies" laid out by Gretchen Legler for improving environmental awareness (40).

These works of fiction by Sullivan, Griffin and Fowley-Doyle take a wide-ranging approach to constructing identity, which diversifies the concept of queerness beyond categories including gay, lesbian, transsexual, bisexual, gender-fluid and others, and strengthens its resistance of any specific label. This kind of imaginative, radical thinking is especially necessary in young adult literature because its characters, and indeed its readership, are uniquely positioned "on the brink of entry into, rather than simply subsumed beneath, the systems of domination" that ecofeminists wish to critique (Curry loc.373).

In Sullivan's novel, Madeline's revelatory discovery that magic is real and transformative allows her to better understand her sexuality as just one aspect of herself. When Oona, the girl who Madeline is attracted to and with whom she has a romantic sexual encounter, tells her that most people where they live in Ballyfran "have their own strange way of being in the world", it intimates to the reader that although Madeline's realisation thatshe is gay is significant it is not of foremost importance in the construction of her identity (267). The novel is not a traditional "coming-out narrative" in the sense that Madeline's discovery of the wide-ranging potential of her identity (and others') is as essential to her coming-of-age as her sexuality. The following exchange between Oona and Madeline emphasises this: Oona explains that her personal "strange way of being in the world" requiresher to always be in or near water (267). Madeline asks, "what are you?" and Oona responds, "a lesbian", even though she knows that Madeline means to enquire about her magic capacities, rather than her sexuality (267). Following this interchange, they both laugh at the implied ordinariness of Oona's sexuality in relation to her magical powers, and Oona describes a desire to be "more

typical" that has to more to do with her magical draw to water than her sexuality (268). This depiction of queerness corresponds with José Muños' definition as "that which is oriented towards the future, the not-yet, and the creative imagining and emergence of alternative ways of living and being in the world" (qtd. in Hall, 2014, 204). Oona likens the different aspects of her identity – her sexuality and her magic – by saying, "they are similar, I think. I have so many parts of my identity that people do not like, that can be dangerous: how I look, who I love, and this, also" (267). By Muños' definition, queerness is not simply "a being, but a doing towards the future". It is an "insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (qtd. in Hall, 204). Madeline's self- acceptance about her sexuality is tempered by magic: "all of it is strange but so am I" (349). This is similarly the case for the protagonists in Griffin's *Other Words For Smoke* and Fowley-Doyle's *All The Bad Apples* – Mae and Deena.

In *Other Words For Smoke*, magic is plainly equated with imagination and a belief in alternatives when Mae wonders, "how much of magic was just fooling yourself anyway? Giving wiggle room for belief" (loc. 2640). Mae's positive experience as a lesbian inmodern-day Ireland is strikingly different to Audrey's relatively much more negative experience in the recent past. Audrey felt she had to "run away or get put away" because theythought she "was queer" (loc. 2796). Comparatively, Mae's homosexuality is not the source of her unhappiness: it's that her love for Bevan is unrequited. This, and a later description of a pleasurable, uncomplicated romance with a girl, establishes Mae's sexuality as one part of a larger construction of self in a similar way to how Madeline and Oona are represented in Sullivan's text. The texts communicate that sexuality is just one aspect of remarkableness, of strangeness or queerness, and of magic in its broadest sense. Setting magic, as a symbol of revolutionary thinking, in this way, alongside these two very different experiences of homosexuality stresses the possibility of Ireland's outgrowing the damaging aspects of its history, culture and identity, in which the Catholic religion has played an integral part.

Unlike O'Neill's characters, the characters in these texts offer broadened ways for young people to orient themselves towards the world in such a way that is not confined by gender. Like O'Neill, however, these other authors make real-life connections and use paratextual elements, such as footnotes and authors' notes, which politicise and problematise their novels as works of literature.

x. Author Persona and Interpretive Authority

Patricia Kennon praises Sullivan, Griffin and Fowley-Doyle for intensifying the symbolic resonance of the witch by merging it with "female adolescence, ambivalences around the potential power of teenage girls, and the backdrop of Irish histories of injustice against women and girls" (2020, 137). As a result of scandals and social reform in Ireland in recent years, the era of the Laundry has come sharply into focus as a continued human rights issue and as a locus for understanding the circumstances of Ireland's past and present concerning women's rights and bodily autonomy. The frankness with which these authors address these issues is admirable; however, some of their efforts to mediate history and frame contemporary stories from a feminist perspective have an oppressive effect. Rather than allow the texts to act as works of literature, these authors speak directly to the reader outside of the text. Paratextual intrusions, such as authors' notes and afterwords, guide our reading ofthe works – so much so that author persona and interpretative authority loom large.

Footnotes are used in *Other Words For Smoke* at repeated intervals to underscore how recently Laundry's were in operation in Ireland: "a Magdalene Laundry is not a building. It is a threat" (10); "it is happening again" (12). These footnotes restate what details in the novel already show, which emphasises the questionable nature of their presence. In the text itself, Audrey tells Bevan that "the year" her "Ma got pregnant" with her "was the year" the Laundry shut down and that her mother would have "been done for otherwise" (2805). In the same way, an author's note as an afterword to Fowley-Doyle's *All The Bad Apples* reminds

the reader what the work of fiction has already expressed: that while Ireland has changed progressively for the better regarding issues of bodily autonomy and women's rights, "the past is still so close" (343). In the afterword the reader is urged to "[C]ry. Rage. Speak out. Break the stigma. Break the curse" (343). These aspects of the texts expand their status beyond magical-realist works of fiction and situates them as literature that is particularly consciously political and, in turn, overtly didactic in nature.

Many of the paratextual elements in these works have to do with the authors' political agenda. Sometimes, they suggest an effort to justify their research on the topic or their authenticity as a writer. At other times, they appear to come from a fear of leaving something out or offending. For example, Fowley-Doyle includes a footnote to her afterword justifying her use of "mother" and "women" when talking about people who can become pregnant in the book. She says that although the book focuses on women, she wants to "emphasise that trans men, genderqueer and non-binary folks – not just cis women – can and do get pregnant" (341). Efforts by authors to underscore their works' ideological nature and situate them as subversive such as these might appear libertarian and inclusive in nature and thus something that authors *should* do but it is worth questioning their necessity. The moral purpose behind these paratextual elements and emphasises may stem from efforts to correct children's and young adult literature's tradition of exclusion or stereotypical presentation of genders, sexualities, ethnicities, and others, which numerous studies have revealed (Sarland 1999, 39; Ramdarshan Bold 2019, 1). Certainly, practices of increasing critical reflectiveness on the parts of authors, readers, publishers and critics alike concerning a more inclusive future for youth publishing is necessary, especially in light of current studies, such as the Book Trust and the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education's 20201 reports finding that "long-term systemic change in representation in children's literature and publishing" is still necessary despite "some positive progress over the past three years" (bookstrust.org). However, if authors feel pressured to include such details by way of explaining themselves and their texts,

it is worth considering how this might affect the literature.

A sense of righteousness in reinstating women's voices in contemporary YA literature is evident in Sullivan's *Perfectly Preventable Deaths*. Sullivan uses the names of real women as the women whom the character Lon has murdered. The use of one name in particular, Savita Halappanavar, in this context gives the works a certain cultural and political weight. Savita Halappanavar died in a maternity hospital in Galway, Ireland, in 2012 after being denied the abortion that would have saved her life. The list of names of women whom Lon has murdered, drawn on the wall of the cave where he takes Madeline's sister and attempts to murder her by eating her, includes the name Savita (288). The list of ninety-two women's names, taking up more than three entire pages of the novel, is a stark reminder of the deaths of many women who died in Ireland as a result of being denied an abortion that would have saved their lives or as a result of finding unsafe means to have an abortion. However, the moral justification for the use of real women's names is questionable.

These paratextextual elements – so commonplace in these Irish authors' works and inYA literature more widely –alter the context for reading works of YA fiction, such that the work's meaning cannot be found within its own parameters and is contingent upon authors' ideological intertextuality. As is the case with these Irish YA authors, the moral virtue of their consciously political inclusions are, at times, driven by a righteousness that encroachesupon the reader's personal reading space.

xi. Conclusion

This chapter argued that O'Neill's depiction of technology as an obliterating socialising force that is particularly damaging to women is overly narrow. Nonetheless, it was maintained that *Only Ever Yours* offers broader insights into the relationship between modern culture and technology and the exploitation of all humans for capitalist gain. O'Neill's construction of nature and the human body as passive social constructions in *Only Ever Yours* was compared

with Griffin's agential human/non-human hybrid bodies in *Spare and Found Parts*. It was argued that O'Neill's focus on ideology and discourse comes at the expense of an exploration of lived, corporeal experience. It was argued that in Griffin's *Other Words for Smoke*, Deirdre Sullivan's *Perfectly Preventable Deaths* and Moïra Fowley-Doyle's *All the Bad Apples*, the relationship between magic and materiality promote how knowledge can operate as a practicable avenue to resistance and power. It was argued that the interrogation of traditional gender roles and depictions of broadened, more inclusive, representations of adolescent identity in O'Neill's works is effected with far greater significance in Sullivan's, Griffin's, and Fowley-Doyle' YA works. This chapter argued that these three texts offer a broader awareness of the interrelatedness of social inequalities than O'Neill's works. These powerful and, as yet, under-discussed, contemporary Irish texts engage with intersections between feminist activism and eco-consciousness and deserve more critical and international attention. Nevertheless, this chapter argued that aspects of these authors' literature borders on entrenching essential concepts to do with gender. Their approach to interpreting history through a feminist lens is sometimes heavy-handed. The paratextual aspects of the texts discussed in this chapter balance the works between fiction and reality; between literature and political manifestos.

Conclusion

Describing O'Neill's first novel as a "compelling critique of eating disorders today", Heather Braun argues that *Only Ever Yours* "articulates astartlingly relevant message for twenty-first-century readers and for young women in particular: namely, that the desire to conform to a single female ideal of beauty leads most directly to the disappearance of self" (2018, 81). In agreement with Braun's assertion, this dissertation found that O'Neill's explorationof the effects of female idealisation on young girls' identity and self-worth is valuable.

However, depicting women's self-confidence, their sexual agency and their likelihood to experience an eating disorder or anorexia as exclusively linked to their feeling pressured to meet society's standards of beauty is concerning. O'Neill's depiction of extreme self-harm and destructiveness in the pursuit of an unattainable beauty ideal in *Only Ever Yours* can also be understood in terms of obsession and optimization in relation to social media and technology – as Chapter Four argued. However, the novel is presented and has been received as a novel about the damaging result of patriarchal beauty standards on women and girls in contemporary youth culture. As this dissertation has argued, it is dangerous to think of sexual violence exclusively in terms of patriarchy or sexist oppression; this is similarly the case with self-image, body-consciousness and extreme disorders, such as anorexia or bulimia.

While, disappointingly, agenda-driven novels like O'Neill's counterproductively play into stereotypes and fail in their purpose, other YA works suggest the existence of increasingly egalitarian views of power and gendered embodiment. A more extensive study would offer a broader discussion on how YA novels apply a contemporary feminist perspective to depictions of masculinity and femininity, bodily autonomy, "rape culture" and power. It would examine gender and sexuality in past and present Irish YA more exhaustively and consider rape narratives in a broader selection of novels.

Connecting O'Neill's works with adult novels that share similar themes, such as Naomi Alderman's *The Power,* suggests their liminal nature and would provide a further area for research. Alderman's speculative, dystopian novel *The Power* presents power as shaped by and detached from gender. Published for adults in 2016, *The Power* has characteristics of both YA literature and adult literature. *The Power*'s central narrative premise sees women develop the ability to harness and use electrical powers, making them physically the dominant gender – a power which many abuse. Like in O'Neill's works, gender power relations dominate in *The Power*; however, Alderman's novel offers an analysis of power as shaped by, and yet detached from, gender that is contrary to O'Neill's: "Gender is a shell game. What is a man? Whatever a woman isn't. What is a woman? Whatever a man is not. tap on it and it's hollow. Look under the shells: it's not there" (Alderman 338). Alderman's novel was published at a time when conversations about sexual violence and sexual harassment against women were at a cultural height. The YA novel, *The Boy I Am,* by K.L. Kettle was published in January 2021 at a time when boys' body-image and the treatment of boys in educational settings when "rape culture" is being discussed is increasingly a topic for debate in the media.

The Boy I Am is marketed as a "gender flipped, speculative YA thriller" for "fans of Louise O'Neill" (klkettle.com) and as "*The Power* for teenagers" (madelieinemilburn.co.uk). *The Boy I Am* is set in a similar near-future, but unlike *The Power,* the female elite is the status quo. Other novels have considered similar themes, such as the 1915 utopian novel, *Her Land,* written by feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman, which depicts an ideal social order of women. However, the different approaches to gender and power in O'Neill's and Kettle's YA novels – published seven years apart – reveals the changing nature of YA literature's role in responding to and contributing to dominant culture. Although set in a dystopian near-future with parallels to *The Power* and *Only Ever Yours*, the "gender-flip" in *The Boy I Am* is pointedly different. In the novel, women are the elite and men grow up in the "House of

Boys" until they are auctioned off as wards into the protection of Guardian women. In *The Boy I Am*, body image and objectification issues are concerned with men's bodies, muscularity, and steroid use. A more far-reaching study would examine how YA literature's relationship with the fast-paced nature of cultural change effects it as a genre – especially regarding how certain texts might be particularly in vogue during a certain era and out-of-favour in the next. While this dissertation focuses on a single YA author, in a more extensive study, it's analysis of trends in YA literature could be developed to offer a broader discussion about the development and current state of Irish and international YA literature.

Chapter One of this dissertation contextualised O'Neill's works in relation to contemporary concerns in Irish and international YA literature. It was argued that feminism's mainstream prominence and marketability have contributed to the questionable aspects of O'Neill's fiction, highlighted in this dissertation, going largely uncriticised. Kerry Mallan states that "as a form of cultural production", contemporary young adult literature is "highly responsive to social change and political debates" (2017, 2). As such, she argues that it is "crucially implicatedin shaping the values, attitudes and behaviours of children and young people" (2). The level of didacticism in O'Neill's works and her prominent position as a cultural commentator makes her more "crucially implicated" in influencing readers in this way.

O'Neill's literary and cultural authority is especially concerning because of the intricacy of the works' subjectmatter and their intended young audience. Given how O'Neill's depiction of violence and rape as exclusively to do with misogyny, gender bias and patriarchy presents all boys as potential rapists and all girls as potential victims of rape, this is particularly concerning.

O'Neill's works raise issues that are topical and relevant to contemporary debates that speak to "the greater human condition, and not just to the specific teen experience" (xi Garcia). This has resulted in their being commercially popular with both adults and

teenagers. This dissertation discussed O'Neill's liminal position as a young adult/adult author and emphasised how this broadens her reach. Like her other texts, O'Neill's latest novel *After the Silence* has been positively received. The novel explores coercive control, which is a particularly topical subject matter. Like *Asking For It*, the novel is similarly "ripped from the headlines", inspired by a murder in West Cork when O'Neill was eleven and by true-crime podcasts (O'Neill "How the West Cork"). It is interesting to note how themes of artifice, rivalry and money, which are central to *Asking For It*, are carriedthrough into *After the Silence.* A broader study would analyse how a lack of consideration is given to broader aspects of identity across O'Neill's works. It would argue that despite O'Neill's emphasis on gender as the dominant apparatus of power, her characters' position within a White, middle-class materialist context is more significant to their abuse of power than gender and misogyny.

Chapter Two argued that O'Neill's construction of young people and her assertions about feminism and culture are flawed. Contemporary youth magazines and media discourse were analysed as evidence of young people's awareness of the arbitrary nature of beauty "work" and their capacity to resist dominant media messaging. It was argued that O'Neill's texts fail to consider the contradictory and complicated position that many women inhabit today concerning their negotiation of tensions between aspects of female identity considered feminist and others considered non- (or anti-) feminist. This chapter argued that O'Neill's works perpetuate dangerous assumptions about the relationship between women's oppression and dominant media messaging, and gendered violence and porn.

This chapter compared O'Neill's depiction of young people controlled by dominant ideology in the media and conservative systems of prejudice in society with teenage protagonists in the other YA texts who resist and challenge hegemonic constructions of idealised feminine identity and sexuality. In *Only Ever Yours* and *Asking For It* attention to presenting identity as a social construction is so strong that the integrity of characterisation is

often weakened by the utilisation of persons as mouthpieces for feminist literary reference or exhortation. This chapter argued that rather than emphasise young people's potential as agents of social change, O'Neill's characters indicate that power relations are fixed and unchangeable. It was argued that, in comparison, the other YA texts articulate pragmatic feminist messages of empowerment. This chapter maintained that O'Neill's efforts to explore female subjectivity fail to offer new configurations of femininity and instead reinscribe old ones – chiefly those to do with female power.

A comparative analysis of O'Neill's *Only Ever Yours* and *Asking For It,* and Isabel Quintero's *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* and Helen Barnes' *Killing Aurora* showed that in contrast with O'Neill's works, these other texts reveal the arbitrary nature of gendered norms and emphasise the power of choice that young people possess when confronted with them. This chapter argued that O'Neill's representation of teenage girls stands in sharp contrast to much of the expression of real-life teenage girlhood in popular culture and other Irish and international YA literature. A comparison of O'Neill's texts with Irish YA works that deal with similar content revealed how Siobhán Dowd's *A Swift Pure Cry* and Moïra Fowley-Doyle's *All the Bad Apples* offer their readers a space to analyse and reflect on Irish history and opportunities to question and transform contemporary cultural ideologies and social practices more than O'Neill's works.

Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* and Isabel Quintero's *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces* were compared with *Asking For It* in Chapter Three. It was argued that Quintero's novel examines "rape culture" more critically than O'Neill's and meaningfully interrogates hegemonic notions of femininity and masculinity. In her qualitative study of forty in-depth interviews with serving UK police officers in 2018, Leslie McMillan found that attitudes about women as "deceitful, vengeful and ultimately regretful of sexual encounters" remain powerfully evident throughout the British law enforcement and judicial and governmental systems (9). She argues that this impacts complainants' willingness to report sexual crime, and advocates

for more training and institutional policy frameworks concerning the treatment of complainants within the UK justice system (9). O'Neill's scrutiny of flaws in the judicial system and the gendered nature of how victims of sexual violence are often conceptualised and treated is commendable, as is her examination of the effects of trauma. Nevertheless, the novel's depiction of "rape culture" as orthodoxy disempowers women and demonises men.

Chapter Three offered an analysis of moments in *Asking For It* where consent was problematised and found that despite some subtlety, the novel definitively argues that sexual violence exists on a continuum, from sexist language and objectification of women in media to sexual assault and rape. It was argued that O'Neill's feminist agenda taking precedence over nuanced characterisation is particularly concerning in her characterisation of boys in *Asking For It*. O'Neill does not discriminate between the relatively minor and the most extreme: she suggests that the boys' sexist attitudes and demeaning language will inevitably result in forced sex. This chapter argued that O'Neill's characterisation of boys as predators encourages girls to see themselves as victims and will not promote mutual respect. The deeply didactic impulse evident in O'Neill's depiction of "rape culture" in *Asking For It* is evident in how narrow a range of sexual identities and experiences O'Neill presents. Adolescent girls are endangered, fragile and violated; adolescent boys are dangerous, strong and violent.

Chapter Four widened out O'Neill's social criticism about how essential gendered differences are projected through popular culture to include a critique of the tools of corporate/capitalist colonisation that sees gender as only one route to the acquisition of wealth (monetary, property, political, legal, epistemological, and others). As well as the overt and transparent feminist ideologies, this chapter revealed implied ideologies to do with capitalist individualism, or "optimisation" culture, in *Only Ever Yours*. A more extensive work would widen out this critique to include further exploration of the text's suggested

meanings concerning homogenisation as an aspect of cultural globalism and post-modernist celebration of multiplicity. This chapter examined aspects of *Only Ever Yours* outside of O'Neill's concern with the intersections between gender and identity and engage more broadly with posthumanism and the "ongoing critique of what it means to be human" (Simon 8). It was argued that O'Neill's eves offer a pessimistic diagnosis of the relationship between modern culture and technology and the exploitation and objectification of women. Comparatively, the relationship between the human body and technology in *Spare and Found Parts* presents the body as a source of potential rather than a passive, disembodied entity controlled by social conditioning and male domination.

Griffin's *Other Words for Smoke*, Deirdre Sullivan's *Perfectly Preventable Deaths* and Moïra Fowley Doyle's *All the Bad Apples* were presented as exploring identity as both social and material and, as such, engaging more with contemporary feminist concerns than O'Neill's works. It was argued that these other texts' concentration on presenting characters both embodied and embedded in the natural world engages with theories of eco-feminism that situate environmental issues as feminist concerns. Work with a different scope would examine Irish YA literature's potential to develop theories offeminism, environmentalism and eco-feminism in exciting new directions concerning YA literature more broadly. It would ask whether Irish YA literature reproduces or deviates from recognised patterns in other nationally defined literature dealing with similar subject matter.

It was argued that these other authors make connections to real life events in the spirit of examining the past in the hopes of revisioning the future; however, the presence of the paratextual authorial voice is overly oppressive and diminishes the reader's experience of the texts as works of literature. The political righteousness of O'Neill's self-styled feminist role in YA fiction and youth culture is concerning and reflects a troubling trend in YA literature, whereby the author's persona and interpretive authority impinge on works of fiction. A wider

study would allow for a more developed interrogation of how and why paratextual authorial voice is so prevalent in these women authors works and in the works of many YA authors internationally – particularly women YA authors.

This dissertation has argued that O'Neill's texts fail in their purpose: they do not mitigate dangerous assumptions about hierarchical gender norms and are more harmful than helpful. Despite the complexity of O'Neill's works' subject matter, they offer little nuance. Instead of rethinking traditional gender conventions, the works emphasise man-woman binary paradigms and articulate feminist issues in ways that are often contradictory to equality. The works are built on dangerous generalisations. Despite critiquing how attributing certain characteristics, such as agreeability, to women reifies what may be socially constructed, the texts strongly present women and men as homogenised groups. Although O'Neill's focus is straight, White, middle-class women, she advocates for a universal solidarity of shared suffering among all women. O'Neill universalises women's experiences with cultural expectations of female idealisation and sexist structures, regardless of variations in identities and experiences. Men are similarly treated as a collective category and essentialised as violent.

Within the context of MeToo's cultural reckoning, O'Neill's novels and others like them dealing with similar issues have the opportunity to develop a critical conversation around contemporary constructions of femininity and masculinity, adolescent sexuality(ies), consent and rape and sexual assault, which might cultivate empathy and healing. Unfortunately, O'Neill's works engage too much with moral outrage and leave readers with an incomplete, biased understanding of sexual violence, and a distorted conception of adolescence and sexuality.

YA literature plays a key role in defining and depicting gendered ideologies. This dissertation has emphasised the necessity to look beyond the classification of O'Neill's

ideology as “feminist” and consequently progressive to include an analysis of whether her works do more to further gender antagonism than equality. Rather than challenge current socially constructed views of adolescence, works like Louise O’Neill’s add to society’s most problematic assumptions about young people’s natural characteristics, particularly concerning notions of adolescents as both “endangered” and “dangerous” (Lesko 2012).

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