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**The Mermaid as a Mask for  
Harsh Realities in Irish Literature**

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## ABSTRACT

This B. A. Thesis aims to explore a significant purpose of the genre: to represent harsh realities that may be challenging to address in a realistic style due to their controversial nature. Specifically, this paper will examine three Irish literary works which include the figure of a mermaid as one of their characters. These literary texts are Rosa Mulholland's "The Girl from under the Lake", Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's "The Mermaid Legend", and Jan Carson's *The Fire Starters*. Through a formal and contextual analysis of these stories, it will be illustrated how each author's use of the mermaid has allowed them to engage with complex social situations that were occurring in Ireland in the period that each author lived through. This study will reflect how fiction is able to subtly portray reality without addressing it in a crude manner.

**Keywords:** Fantasy, Fiction, Reality, Mermaid, Ireland

## RESUMEN

Este Trabajo de Fin de Grado pretende analizar uno de los principales objetivos del género: ilustrar duras realidades que pueden ser difíciles de abordar con un enfoque realista debido a su controversia. En concreto, este trabajo examinará tres obras literarias irlandesas que incluyen la figura de una sirena como uno de sus personajes. Estos textos literarios son "The Girl from under the Lake" de Rosa Mulholland, "The Mermaid Legend" de Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, y *The Fire Starters* de Jan Carson. A través de un análisis formal y contextual de estas historias se ilustrará cómo el uso que cada autora hace de la sirena les ha permitido tratar situaciones sociales complejas que estaban ocurriendo en Irlanda en el periodo de cada autora. Este estudio reflejará cómo la ficción puede retratar sutilmente la realidad sin abordarla con crudeza.

**Palabras clave:** Fantasía, Ficción, Realidad, Sirena, Irlanda



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## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation will explore how fiction is employed in literature to depict harsh social situations that are difficult to approach in a descriptive and realistic manner. The reason behind the lack of freedom to address these themes is the controversy that they cause among the population, and the censorship and judgement that authors might face because of this controversy. This paper will illustrate this hypothesis by analysing three works by three Irish female authors who use the figure of a mermaid to depict several social situations that were happening in Ireland in their respective periods.

Scholars who have studied fiction and their purposes in literature attach importance to understanding its origins. In this case, the origin of mermaid stories can be traced back to folk legends, which are considered “one of the major categories of oral prose narrative” (Almqvist, “Crossing the Border”, 2). In Ireland, migratory legends are one of the most popular subcategories of folktales. They are characterised by a mixture of realistic and supernatural motifs, themes and characters. In Irish literature, mermaids have been a frequently used motif in this genre. In these legends, mermaids were usually presented as sea creatures that married humans. Thus, these supernatural beings were involved in the activities of everyday life.

Migratory legends have greatly influenced many novels and short stories written in much more recent times. The texts that this paper will explore represent modern versions of the original migratory legends dealing with mermaids. The first one is “The Girl from under the Lake”, a short novel written by Rosa Mulholland in 1881. This text is a fairy tale, and it deals with the relationship between a man and a mermaid. The second is “The Mermaid Legend”, published in 1991. It is one of the short stories compiled in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne’s *Eating Women is Not Recommended*. The most distinctive feature of this story is its structure, with a dual narrative in which the mermaid’s tale is interconnected with the main plot of the story. The last text to be discussed is *The Fire Starters*, published by Jan Carson in 2019. In this case, the genre of the novel is magical realism, and the figure of the mermaid is used as a fantastic relief for the real scenario presented throughout the plot.

Some experts have focused their studies on similar themes. For instance, Mar and Oatley argued that “literary fiction is largely about people and the problems that arise when their desires, emotions, and goals come into conflict” (182), rather than being written just to entertain readers. Furthermore, the knowledge that this genre shares with its readers is primarily social, and fictional authors attempt to “simulate ideas and situations, [which] can enter our emotional system and prompt it toward the experience of emotions that we might otherwise rarely acknowledge” (Mar and Oatley, 183). Thus, they claim that fiction aims to generate a social response in readers by targeting their empathy through stories that subtly reflect real-life scenarios. Zunshine also inquired: “Why do we read fiction?” (16). Among other hypotheses, According to Zunshine, fiction is “a relief from the business of real life” (19), so readers find in fictional stories an escape mechanism that reduces the harshness of contemporary real-life issues.

My thesis agrees with these two arguments, but it will focus on the level of fantasy within the genre of fiction. The three chosen literary texts will be analysed from a formal, historical and social perspective to understand how fiction and fantasy are used to represent real historical and social situations that were sensitive among the Irish population. In these cases, the authors use the figure of the mermaid to subtly portray other serious social events that took place in the context in which they lived.

Thus, this dissertation will be divided into three chapters. The first one will introduce the subject by studying the theoretical background of the work. It will explore migratory legends, and some mermaid tales from ancient folklore, such as Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid”. In addition, this chapter will present the three stories that will be analysed and their relationship with the previous texts. The second chapter will provide a formal analysis of the three stories by exploring the narrative strategies and style each author employs to depict the mermaid and their true purpose in including them, analysing the subtle themes that they address in their stories. Finally, the third chapter will explain how fiction is used to represent different rough social and historical realities that were occurring in Ireland at different periods, which could not be addressed in a crude and totally realistic way. Therefore, this last chapter will defend my thesis, and it will title the dissertation: “The Mermaid as a Mask for Harsh Realities in Irish Literature”.



# 1

## **MIGRATORY LEGENDS AND “THE LITTLE MERMAID”: SOURCES OF INSPIRATION FOR MODERN MERMAID STORIES**

Folk legends have been present in the European literary tradition for centuries. However, the cultural variations in each European region result in the broad and varied nature of the genre. There are distinct cultural aspects that shape the legends of each European country, and these folkloric differences are very noticeable between Ireland and the rest of Europe. The folklore of each country usually deals with themes that are popular among their population. For instance, in the case of Irish literature, religion is a factor that has largely influenced it. Almqvist compares Norwegian and Irish folklore to illustrate this. Religious differences and the cultural differences they entail are “likely to be mirrored in the popularity of certain legends in Ireland and Norway, as well as other cultural differences” (Almqvist, “Crossing the Border”, 30). There are plenty of thematic differences in the folklore of the two countries. For example, black magic, witchcraft and demons are cultural factors that often appear in Norwegian folklore. This is due to the frequent witch processes that took place in Norway during the Middle Ages and the influence they had on Norwegian society and culture (Almqvist, “Crossing the Border”, 30). But it would not make sense to refer to this subject in Irish folklore, as it does not have the same relevance. Thus, Irish folklore deals with different themes and depicts different issues because it has a different religious background. These themes have greatly influenced the literature of later years. For instance, there are frequent allusions to the conflict between Catholics and Protestants. In addition, the use of the Irish language is very common in Irish literature, reflecting their original language and culture. The reason why this language is used in these stories lies in their origins, as many of them were composed by Irish speakers, so “Irish words and phrases occasionally are included in the texts” (Almqvist, “Crossing the Border”, 9).

However, despite the interest that folk legends have aroused among scholars in recent years, this type of fictional literature, and especially mythical legends, were neglected in Europe in their origins, and Ireland is one of the places in which this genre has suffered the greatest abandonment (Almqvist, “Crossing the Border”, 4). In fact, the

popularity of these folktales was not very remarkable in Ireland before the nineteenth century compared to the rest of Europe. Scholars have not found migratory legends with “a standard matching that provided by the Grimm brothers” (Almqvist, “Crossing the Border”, 19) prior to that period.

The term ‘migratory legend’ refers to a type of mythical legend that mixes the real and the supernatural world and would therefore suffer less from neglect. Commenting on this genre, Almqvist states that “Ireland is richer in migratory legends on the supernatural than most other countries” (“Of Mermaids and Marriages”, 212). Migratory legends can be defined as stories “in which man is pitted against supernatural beings or forces” (Almqvist, “Crossing the Border”, 2). In addition, in Irish migratory legends, the coexistence of the supernatural with human beings while “they engage in everyday activities” (Almqvist, “Crossing the Border”, 30) is a common feature. Therefore, in this specific genre in Ireland, many fantastic themes that were very popular in European literature are not present. For instance, werewolves, or female solitary wood-spirit legends are almost non-existent in Irish literature, whereas they were much more popular in the rest of Europe, such as in Swedish folklore. In these European stories there is often a natural setting that is related to the background of the characters. Thus, these characters could not appear in migratory legends because their plots are set in everyday life spaces, like houses or populated areas rather than in natural settings.

Many European migratory legends have similar characters. For example, the presence of a supernatural woman, such as fairy women or nightmares in the shape of women, is very common in this kind of folkloric tales. But the most representative group of supernatural women that appear in Irish migratory tales consists of “aquatic beings, mermaids or seal maidens” (Almqvist, “Irish Migratory Legends”, 4). One of the reasons for the interest in these characters is that the sea was seen as a “joining link between countries, not a divider” (Almqvist, “Irish Migratory Legends”, 8). The sea was the element that unified different worlds. This can be perceived in tales in which ordinary men marry zoomorphic or semi-zoomorphic beings coming from the sea, which is very common in Irish literature. These creatures are “supernatural or supernaturally transformed female beings” (Almqvist, “Irish Migratory Legends”, 2). In Irish literature, the most common one is “a female creature with a human torso ending in a fish tail” (Kickingeder, 41): a mermaid.

The purpose of migratory legends is controversial. For instance, some literary experts argue that the legend of the mermaid who marries the man deals with the importance of marrying someone similar, while others claim that it has to do with the conflict of marriage and separation (Almqvist, “Crossing the Border”, 39). However, the moral of the story depends largely on how each version of the tale approaches the subject. This is because the perception of the story is different if it is told “from the point of view of the woman, [...] from the point of view of the man, [or] from the point of view of the children” (Almqvist, “Crossing the Border”, 39). Nevertheless, there are many different versions of the mermaid tale, and even in Ireland it has different variations. For instance, depending on the theme or setting of the story, each version of the mermaid legend may be “not only recognizable as Irish but also more specifically as derived from the north of Ireland” (Almqvist, “Irish Migratory Legends”, 17). Specifically, the versions of this tale coming from northwestern counties are characterised by the fact that the separation between the mermaid and her husband is unconsciously provoked by their children. But every tale is different, and analysing each of them is necessary to understand the background and purpose of each version of the legend.

### ➤ INFLUENCE OF MIGRATORY LEGENDS ON LATER LITERARY TEXTS:

The influence of Hans Christian Andersen’s tale “The Little Mermaid” (1837) on other tales with a similar theme cannot be ignored. For instance, when reading the stories that this paper is going to explore, certain literary similarities with “The Little Mermaid” can be perceived. This tale was published in 1837, and it is based on stories from “the traditions of an older feudal oral folk culture” (Mortensen, 439), such as those of Danish and German tradition. “The Little Mermaid” is the story of a mermaid who lives in an underwater kingdom with her father and older sisters. The Little Mermaid is very interested in the “upper world” (Andersen, 4) and she wants to explore it to learn more about humans. When she visits the surface, she sees a prince with whom she falls in love. She makes a deal with a sea witch: she would give up her beautiful voice in exchange for a pair of legs so that she could go to the surface, but if the prince did not love her back, she would turn into sea foam. Eventually, the prince marries another princess. The Little Mermaid is tempted by her sisters to kill the prince so that she could return to the water

as a mermaid, but she refuses. Her good action turns her into a kind of air spirit, and she is transformed into an immortal soul.

The adaptation of this tale by Disney and its introduction to the children mass culture has hidden the deeper and darker themes that Andersen included in his tale (Mortensen, 448). Some of these themes are fatherhood, father-daughter relationship, rebelliousness of daughters, emancipation, maturity, marriage, unrequited love, death... Classical Greek mythology had a great influence on future folklore. The figure of the siren was very popular in Greek mythology, and it consisted of a female being similar to a mermaid who attracted sailors from land to sea using her beautiful voice. In Andersen's tale it is the mermaid who wants to get out of her atmosphere, but it kept some features of the classical siren, such as her beautiful voice. To portray this desire of change, Andersen focuses his tale on the "opposition between up and down [...] sea surface and dry land" (Mortensen, 443). In addition, "The Little Mermaid" is related to migratory legends, because Andersen's story is about a supernatural character, the Little Mermaid, who tries to fit into contemporary life. Andersen achieves this by describing the supernatural world of the siren as if it was part of the real life. For example, "the narrator describes plants and creatures from the deep as phenomena from contemporary daily life" (Mortensen, 433), so that the setting of the fantastic world of "The Little Mermaid" seems realistic to the reader.

"The Little Mermaid", as well as other traditional mermaid folktales, has served as an inspiration for many Irish authors in later years, such as those to be analysed in this paper. A clear example is "The Girl from under the Lake", whose setting, characters and plot are very similar to those of "The Little Mermaid". "The Girl from under the Lake" is one of the Irish literary texts whose main character is a mermaid. It was written in 1881 by Rosa Mulholland, a Belfast-born author well known for her gothic tales. This story is set in the north of Ireland. There is a city under the water of Lough Neagh, and one of its inhabitants is a little girl called Nira. Nira is a mermaid who longs to go to the upper world and see where her ancestors belonged. She speaks to a water fairy who allows her to go to the "dry land" (Mulholland, 397), but she must exchange places with an inhabitant of this world and give her a necklace of enchanted pearls. After waiting a while, she finally meets a girl called Runa and they exchange their lives. Nira has forgotten to give the necklace to Runa, but she meets a fox who is willing to help her. The fox would give the

necklace to a frog who would take it to Runa, but the fox lies and keeps the necklace, so Runa never receives it. It keeps it in its cave while Nira starts a new life with a new family. She has no memory of her previous life. One day Nira meets a Spanish soldier named Pedro and they become very close friends. Pedro asks Nira to marry him, and she accepts. Then the fox gives her the necklace that it was supposed to give to Runa, and it lies saying that Runa had sent it back. After talking to the fox, Nira remembers her own story again. Then the fox and the frog contact Runa to make her realise that she should have the necklace and to make her want to go to the dry land to get it back. Suddenly Runa appears where Nira and Pedro were, and she is ready to take revenge and reclaim her original place in the world. As soon as Nira gives Runa her necklace, Pedro believes Runa and begins to lose his love for his wife. Then Nira leaves and Runa regains her place in her world. She proves “what a great and glorious princess she was” (Mulholland, 629) before marrying Pedro. One day, Runa and Pedro were sailing, and Runa’s necklace fell to the lake. When she lost her necklace, she also lost all her beauty and charm. Finally, Runa and the necklace disappear into the lake, and they were never seen again. After all these events, Pedro is very ill and close to death. But, one day, Nira returns to earth led by an angel, and they get married again.

The influence of Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid” on this tale is very noticeable in several respects. First, there are a lot of similarities in the plot, characters, setting and structure of both stories. In both there is a mermaid who lives in an underwater city, wants to explore the upper world, and ends up falling in love with a man. In both there is also an evil character who tricks the gullible mermaid. In addition, both stories are presented as fairy tales, but they really hide serious themes in their plot, such as memory, parenthood, marriage, or femininity.

“The Mermaid Legend” is a short story written by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne in 1991. It is one of the short stories in her collection *Eating Women is Not Recommended*. With these short stories, Ní Dhuibhne wanted to portray what the situation of women was like in Ireland in the second half of the twentieth century. This story takes place in a more realistic environment than “The Girl from under the Lake”. The main character, who is also the narrator, is an English woman who works in a pub. There she met an Irish man who was very different from her, but when he asked her out on a date, she accepted because she was interested in his accent. They enjoyed their time together and they finally

got married. Even though she had accepted, at the altar she already knew that eventually that marriage would end and that she would regret her decision. The author mixes the main plot of the story with a folk tale that is related to it. This tale is about “a man named Eoin Og” (Ní Dhuibhne, 171) who went to the seashore to gather food every winter. One day, when he was down there, he saw a beautiful woman coming from the sea. She was a mermaid. He saw that this woman had left a cloak on a rock beside her while she was on the surface. He picked up her cloak and took it home with him, hoping that she would come looking for it. When the mermaid returned to get the cloak, she “became very fond of him” (Ní Dhuibhne, 171) and they had two children. Eoin hid the cloak from his children, but one day one of them saw him with it and asked her mother about it. She hid it to take it with her later. At night, she left Eoin and returned to the sea with her cloak. Just as the mermaid did, the English girl in the main story also leaves Michael, as divorce was not an option for him. She made this decision because she felt like she did not fit into the marriage: she was always fighting with her husband, she despised his mother, and she was also very stressed by her job at the pub. She feels bad about abandoning her children because, although she knows that Michael and her mum will take care of them, she also knows that she will miss them. The husband does not see her former wife again. In the fairy tale, however, the mermaid used to return from time to time to check on her children and be with them. At the end of the main story, the protagonist is sitting at the pub, and she states: “I’m a sea girl myself” (Ní Dhuibhne, 175). In this way she establishes the connection of her own story with the plot of the folk tale. So, both stories are interrelated because what happened to the protagonist of the folktale also happened to the protagonist of the main story.

This story also addresses a number of concerns in Ireland at the time it was written, such as female expectations, marital separations, child abandonment, parenthood... And these worries are reinforced by the mermaid story. In addition, in this story, as well as in the previous one, there is a setting that is very clearly recognisable as Irish, for example with the mention of pub culture, religious differences, or even with references such as the popular ‘Irish exit’ when the narrator mentions her “divorce Irish style” (Ní Dhuibhne, 173).

Finally, *The Fire Starters* is a novel written by Jan Carson in 2019. The plot is set in Belfast, sixteen years after the Troubles. The novel tells the story of Jonathan and

Sammy, two fathers who live in Belfast. The author explores the theme of fatherhood from two different perspectives. Jonathan is the father of a girl named Sophie. His experience as a father is based on the fact that Sophie's mother is a mermaid, or a siren, as he refers to her. When he met Sophie's mother and he discovered that she was a siren, he could not believe it, he was surprised to have "been seduced by a mythical creature" (Carson, 65). Jonathan is convinced that Sophie has inherited some of her supernatural features. For this reason, Jonathan feels rejection and fear towards his daughter. This causes Jonathan to compare his daughter Sophie to the "Unfortunate Children" (Carson, 141). They are "kids who aren't normal" (Carson, 141) because they have "special powers" (Carson, 141). When Jonathan contacts people who know of their existence, and they tell him that some of them are in Belfast, he admits: "I think I have an Unfortunate Child too" (Carson, 142). Jonathan is a doctor, and he is thinking of cutting his daughter's tongue so that she cannot speak. On the other hand, Sammy's fatherhood experience is very different. It is explored from a more political perspective. The novel deals with the "Tall Fires" (Carson, 22), a number of bonfires which are lit on the Summer. One day, an anonymous person who calls himself "the Fire Starter" (Carson, 26) posts a video on the Internet that goes viral. He demands that the civil liberties of the population are left alone so that they can light fires as high as they want. Thus, according to him, "the city will burn until the politicians agree to lift their restrictions, for it is all but impossible to stop a fire moving in so many directions at once" (Carson, 27). No one knows the identity of the Fire Starter except Sammy, who hides it because it is his son.

One of the main characteristics of this novel is the mixture of the realistic part of the story with fantastic elements. The realistic parts of the story include themes such as parenthood. Another example is the historical background; for instance, the author refers to the 'Eleventh Night bonfires' which consists of the annual bonfires that are lit to recall the victory of the Protestant King William of Orange in 1691. This is only one of the examples that are used throughout the novel to state the consequences that political conflicts had on Ireland and its population. There are also multiple references to the Troubles to reiterate this. This realistic part of the story is portrayed by Jonathan, who knows many patients who suffer from the consequences of the Troubles years after they ended, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, and by Sammy and the effect that the violence and trauma of the conflict had on him. Meanwhile, these realistic events are

counterbalanced by fantastic ones. The most important of these is that Sophie's mother is a mermaid and the fantastic traits that, according to her father, Sophie inherited from her. This fantastic element lowers the serious tone of the political conflicts that the novel deals with, adding an unrealistic theme to the plot. But other fantastic elements are also present, such as children with special powers, or "Unfortunate Children" (Carson, 141) as the author calls them.

In conclusion, "The Girl from under the Lake", "The Mermaid Legend" and *The Fire Starters* are three Irish literary texts from three different centuries that have mermaids as characters. In the three texts it can be observed that, despite their differences, they all deal with issues that concerned the society of each author, such as marriage, parenthood, female expectations, or political conflicts. In the following chapters the three literary works will be analysed, with a focus on what a close reading of each text reveals and on the way they are narrated as well as on the historical and social background of each story.

## 2

### **DIFFERENT NARRATIVE STYLES AND STRATEGIES TO SHAPE THE FIGURE OF THE MERMAID**

One of the main factors that influence the theme, purpose and interpretation of a literary text is its choice of narrative mode. This chapter will analyse the different ways in which the three texts are presented. This analysis will mainly deal with the style, narrative strategies, symbolism and type of narrator chosen by each author. Furthermore, since the figure of the mermaid is one of the main components of the three texts, the chapter will analyse how each author decides to depict her in their texts as well as their purpose when using this character. In this way, it will be revealed that in the three tales, the figure of the mermaid is portrayed in a more modern and contemporary way than it was in previous productions, such as Greek mythology or European folklore.

“The Girl from under the Lake” is a literary text that can be considered a fairy tale. This statement might be confusing if the term ‘fairy tale’ is considered in its original sense. However, it is essential to understand that it is very difficult to define the fairy tale as a specific literary genre because due to the multiple variations that exist “it has become more of a cultural institution than anything else” (Zipes, 7). There are some fairy tales that are aimed at children or adapted so that they can read and understand them, as in the case of “The Little Mermaid”. But there are many literary texts that belong to this genre and are addressed to adults (Zipes, 7). For example, “The Girl from under the Lake” is aimed at adults, as it deals with themes that might be too serious for children to interpret and comprehend, like family and marital conflicts, femininity, and other inner dilemmas. These fairy tales are believed to be “intricately linked with folklore and myth” (Warner, 1) and are therefore influenced by other fairy tales and stories created in the past. In this case, the mermaid and her underwater world were clearly influenced by “The Little Mermaid”, the fairy tale written forty-four years earlier by Hans Christian Andersen.

Rosa Mulholland employs several narrative strategies in her fairy tale. The author uses a third-person narrator to tell the story. The identity of the narrator is unknown, and it is not involved in the plot. The narrator does not change during the plot, and its objectivity is perceived throughout the story for instance, when the main character of the

story is introduced: “There was one creature among them, however, who was different from the rest [...] This was a little girl called Nira” (Mulholland, 395). In addition, the third-person narrator of “The Girl from under the Lake” is omniscient. This type of narrator knows everything about the plot. It has absolute knowledge not only of the characters, but also of what they do and think. This can be seen, for example, when Nira is exploring the upper world and the narrator tells the reader her inner thoughts: “‘Oh, if they would take me in!’ she thought” (Mulholland, 401). This kind of narrator is a narrative strategy that gives reliability to the story. In this case, as the text is a fairy tale, making it more reliable can enable the reader to feel more connected to the story.

Another narrative strategy widely used by Mulholland in this story is symbolism. Mulholland uses several symbols throughout the story that have been widely used in literature. A clear example is the fox. In Western literature, the fox is often associated with “the words ‘cunning’, ‘crafty’, and ‘sly’” (Chadwick, 71). In “The Girl from under the Lake”, the fox also has these characteristics. In the story, the fox deceives Nira, as it said that it would give Runa the pearl necklace, but it does not. Instead, it gives Runa a message and convinces her that she should go to the upper world to meet Nira and retrieve the necklace, which causes Nira’s problems. The narrator refers directly to the fox as a “sly-looking fox” (Mulholland, 539). Another symbol present in the story is the frog, who is also tricked by the fox, as it asked for its help in exchange for a reward, but in the end received nothing. In literature, frogs represent “the water/land opposition and undergo observable metamorphosis” (Babcock-Abrahams, 177). In the story the frog speaks to Runa at the fox’s command to make her realise that she is missing the pearl necklace that she should have. Therefore, it acts as a “natural mediator” (Babcock-Abrahams, 177) between the fox’s upper world and Runa’s underwater world.

All these strategies are used as a resource to represent the figure of the mermaid and to support the story that surrounds her. In “The Girl from under the Lake”, the mermaid assumes a leading role, as she is the protagonist of the story. In this case the mermaid, or Nira, is depicted as an enigmatic character. This mysterious aura is related to the fact that she comes from an underwater world that is unknown to humans: “they were not drowned, but enabled to live out their lives under Lough Neagh in some very mysterious manner” (Mulholland, 395). Furthermore, an important part of the plot of this tale lies on the fact that Nira and Runa are trying to avoid being the mermaid figure. Both

figures, mermaid and human, represent a duality of desire and reality, for when Nira is a mermaid she wishes to have the life that humans have, and when she is human she does not want to return to her reality, which is the mermaid life: “she used to sit constantly on the rocks, looking up through the water, and watching intently, in the hope that someone might come down to take her place” (Mulholland, 398). Therefore, the figure of the mermaid represents a woman who is trapped in her underwater world and who desires to achieve freedom by living her life in the upper world.

“The Mermaid Legend” is a short story included in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne’s collection *Eating Women is Not Recommended*. Ní Dhuibhne is a “self-proclaimed feminist” (Graham, 63), and she used this collection of short stories to portray several situations that women had to live through in her time. “The Mermaid Legend” is a short story that includes dual narratives, as there is an “interposed, translated legend” (Graham, 64) that is recounted alongside the main plot. Therefore, the structure of this short story “could be described as diffractive” (Graham, 65), because there is not a linear narration of the story, and the two narratives are written simultaneously. The character of the mermaid appears on the legend, and it is used as a kind of support for the events that occur to the barmaid in the main story. For instance, when the mermaid in the legend leaves her family and “gets to the sea again” (Ní Dhuibhne, 173), the barmaid leaves her family as well: “I had to get up and go” (Ní Dhuibhne, 173). Both stories are quite similar, but the legend includes fantastic elements, like the mermaid, and the main plot includes social elements, like the tensions between the English and the Irish. Some scholars believe that Ní Dhuibhne chose this legend so that her short story would function as a “contemporary version” (Graham, 65) of the legend. However, the key to this intertextuality is that both stories are constantly being connected. For instance, “iterated references to water elements or water creatures in the first-person narration are a subtext for the mermaid story” (Tallone, 158). The barmaid includes in her narration multiple references to the sea, which is the mermaid’s world, such as “going round in circles I am, like one of them goldfish in that aquarium over there” (Ní Dhuibhne, 169).

“The Mermaid Legend” is a story that uses two different narrators due to its intertextuality. On the one hand, the main story has a first-person narrator. It is told from the barmaid’s perspective, which is an innovative choice of the author, because due to her feminist ideas she tried to include “female protagonists as narrators” (Graham, 65) in her

tales. There are several reasons for the author to choose this type of narrator in this story. One reason is that, as this narration is a contemporary story, if the narrative style “is colloquial and conversational” (Graham, 65), the readers will feel closer to the main character, as she is telling her own story. Another reason is that this first-person narrator is another chance to show the barmaid’s “deviation from societal expectations” (Graham, 65). She achieves this by using a very crude language, which was not considered very feminine at the time. For instance, when she explains her first encounters with her husband, she uses sexualised and vulgar language instead of being more subtle and refined: “Then he nuzzled into my breasts with his long nose and gave me a little nibble” (Ní Dhuibhne, 170). On the other hand, the legend is a third person omniscient narration. As in “The Girl from under the Lake”, the choice of this narration for the legend might be to add a sense of credibility to a plot that is clearly fictional because of its fantastic protagonist, the mermaid. A first-person narration is normally less reliable than a third person narration, because it is not told from an objective perspective. In addition, by using two different narrators, the two stories are more differentiated and, as they are told simultaneously, it is easier for the reader to notice the shift from one to the other.

In Éilís Ní Dhuibhne’s “The Mermaid Legend” the figure of the mermaid is represented in a different way compared to the other two stories that are being analysed. This is partially because the narrative strategies are also different from those used in the other two stories. In this case, the mermaid is not part of the main story. Instead, she appears in the folktale that the author narrates alongside the story. However, she has an important role in the story, because both plots are interrelated and what happens to the protagonist of the main story happens in a similar way to the protagonist of the folktale: “both women have short, passionate affairs with Irish men, have children with them, and then desert both the men and the children” (Moloney, 3). For instance, just after the folktale states that “two children were born, two girls” (Ní Dhuibhne, 171), it is revealed in the main story that the pub owner also had two girls: Samantha and Sharon. In addition, the mermaid represents a woman that leaves her husband and children, which was a controversial topic at the time. Just as the mermaid abandoned her family in the tale, so does the human protagonist in the main story. Thus, the role of the mermaid in this case is to reflect the controversial reality of marital separation. By depicting this theme in the fantastic folktale, the main tale has more freedom to deal with it in a more realistic way.

For instance, to state the claim that is made in the main plot that “a mother can’t be kept from her children” (Ní Dhuibhne, 174), in the folktale the mother “came back now and again to see the children” (Ní Dhuibhne, 175).

*The Fire Starters* is a novel that is considered to belong to the genre of magical realism. Jan Carson’s aim when employing magical realism is “to reflect the turmoil of constructing both a coherent memory of the past and a shared understanding of the present within this context” (Green, 59). Carson wanted to achieve a mixture of past and present because in her story she wants to portray what the situation of Belfast is years after the Troubles had finished. However, she does not depict it in a fully realist manner. The authors of magical realism are said to write “lies that tell the truth” (Hegerfeldt, 7); for instance, some real events, like the ‘Eleventh Night bonfires’ are present in *The Fire Starters*, but the author adds some invented aspects to the plot, such as the anonymous person who starts the fire. Furthermore, uncertainty and confusion are present throughout the plot of the novel. Carson “introduces the uncertain contexts of its setting in the first chapter” (Green, 61). After Jonathan’s prologue, the first two sentences of the story are “This is Belfast. This is not Belfast.” (Carson, 16). By opening the novel with these contradictory sentences, the reader begins to have doubts about the story, because even the setting is not certain. So, with this disorientating quote, the author “throws the entire identity of the city into question” (Green, 61) and sets the confusing tone that the rest of the novel is going to have, giving the reader the opportunity to interpret the story. It is also a way of alluding to times that changed history and can be repeated, as Dickens did at the beginning of *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859).

Carson uses an innovative narrative style. *The Fire Starters* has two different narrators, which is a narrative strategy that is used so that the reader perceives the story from two different perspectives. One strategy used by Carson to include both perspectives is to add a prologue to each part of the novel in which Jonathan and Sammy share their impressions. The first and last parts of the novel, entitled “June” (Carson, 12) and “August” (Carson, 162), are preceded by Jonathan’s prologue, while the second part of the novel, entitled “July” (Carson, 90), is preceded by Sammy’s prologue. Both are first-person narrators, because Carson is concerned with portraying their personal experiences and the consequences of the Troubles in the Irish population. With this type of narration, the story seems more personal as the characters are able to share their own perceptions,

and not just a realistic portrait of the events they recall. Moreover, a first-person narrator is less reliable than a third-person narrator, which adds a certain degree of confusion for the reader, as it is a subjective narration. However, there is also a third-person narrator who intervenes in the story. This narrator is present when the author includes the stories of the Unfortunate Children. They are five stories: “The Girl who could Only Fall” (50), “The Boy with Wheels for Feet” (75), “The Boy who Sees the Future in Every Liquid Surface” (106), “The Girl who is Occasionally a Boat” (125), and “Lois, the Daytime Vampire” (144). Just as Éilís Ní Dhuibhne does in her short story, these stories run parallel to the main plot of the novel, and that is the reason why Carson chose the italic typeface for them. With this intertextuality of sorts, the author introduces the subject of Unfortunate Children to the readers, showing their conditions. This helps the reader to better understand the discussion that Jonathan and Sammy later have about them. The narration of these stories is very peculiar, as it is different from the rest of the novel. Apart from using a third-person omniscient narrator for these fantasy stories, as in “The Mermaid Legend”, Carson uses different narrative strategies. One of these strategies is the occasional use of free indirect speech, in which the third person narrator reflects the thoughts that the characters would express in the stories if they were first-person narratives. For example, in “The Girl who is Occasionally a Boat”, when the narrator portrays the girl’s opinion about the Unfortunate Children, expressions as ‘she thought’, or ‘she said’ are avoided, but her thoughts are included: “She refuses to call herself unfortunate. But it would be nice to have a name for what she is, a word for being in between.” (Carson, 126). In addition, these stories are narrated with very short sentences, providing emphasis and rhythm to them. This can be seen, for instance, in the tale “The Boy with Wheels for Feet”, which includes short sentences such as “Legs bent. Arms taut [...] Holy smoke.” (Carson, 75). These strategies increase the interest of the reader in the stories, causing an effect of tension in the reader.

Another interesting narrative strategy used by Carson in the novel is the choice of the term ‘siren’. She uses this word instead of ‘mermaid’ due to the double meaning of the word ‘siren’. This duality is explained before the plot begins, as both definitions of the word siren are attached: “a device that makes a loud prolonged signal or warning sound” (Carson, 10), and the Greek mythology meaning: “each of a number of women or winged creatures whose singing lured unwary sailors on to rocks” (Carson, 10). This

duality is key to understand the duality of realism and fantasy of the novel. On the one hand, Carson intends to depict several social and historical situations that concerned the Irish population, such as fatherhood, abandonment, parent-child relationships, and the consequences of the Troubles in the population. This realistic part of the novel is related to the realistic meaning of the word 'siren'. On the other hand, the novel includes several fantastic elements throughout the story, such as Sophie's mother being a mermaid, or the children with special powers. This is possible because magical realism allows the author to include fantastic elements in a novel that deals with realist themes. So, the meaning of 'siren' as mermaid is chosen to oppose this fantastic element to the realistic one.

In *The Fire Starters*, the mermaid plays an important role, as she is the mother of Jonathan's daughter. In this story, the mother is not one of the main characters in the story, but the fact that she is Sophie's mother is central to the plot. In this case, as the reader sees the mermaid from Johnathan's perspective, the figure of the mermaid is seen with rejection, because Johnathan does not like that Sophie has inherited her mother's special features. Unlike the previous texts, in this case the main features of the figure of the mermaid that are highlighted are her uncanny nature and differences with humans. In addition, as it has been explained above, an important difference between this mermaid and those in the previous texts is that in this novel the word "siren" is used instead of the word "mermaid". This choice is also influenced by the fact that *The Fire Starters* deals with very different themes from those of the other stories, such as war and political conflicts, so the duality of the word 'siren' allows the author to approach them in a different and original way.

In conclusion, the narrative modes and strategies of "The Girl from under the Lake", "The Mermaid Legend" and *The Fire Starters* is essential to interpret each story and to understand the role of the mermaid in each of them. Each literary work belongs to a different genre as they are written in different styles. "The Girl from under the Lake" is a fairy tale, "The Mermaid Legend" is a short story, and *The Fire Starters* is a magical realism novel. They also use different narrators. In "The Girl from under the Lake" there is a third-person omniscient narrator, "The Mermaid Legend" combines a first-person narrator and a third-person omniscient narrator, and *The Fire Starters* combines first-person and third-person narrators. Finally, each author uses several strategies in their works, for instance Mulholland's symbolism, Ní Dhuibhne's intertextuality, and Carson's

word choices. And although the figure of the mermaid is a fundamental element in all three stories, each one portrays her in a different way.

### THE MERMAID AS A MASK TO PORTRAY COMPLEX SOCIO-HISTORICAL EVENTS

The analysis of these three literary texts reveals the differences and similarities between them. One of their most notable similarities is the fact that the fictional parts of their stories represent social and historical realities. In these literary texts, the fantastic element of the mermaid is a resource used by the author of each story in two different senses. On the one hand, the figure of the mermaid is used as a relief for the dense socio-historical content that each novel contains, like gender issues in “The Girl from under the Lake”, the rivalry between the Irish and the English and divorce in “The Mermaid Legend”, and The Troubles and their consequences in *The Fire Starters*. On the other hand, the mermaid is used as a fantastical device that allows the author to deal with controversial social issues and situations that were happening in Ireland in real life in a more open way. These three stories share some of these social themes, such as parenthood, family relationships, leaving home, female roles and expectations. However, each story also includes social issues that are exclusive to them.

Despite being a fairy tale in which fantasy plays an essential role, since the main character is a mermaid, it cannot be denied that in “The Girl from under the Lake” Mulholland includes several elements that connect the story to real life in Ireland. This is due to “Mulholland’s interest in Ireland’s social problems” (Cahill, 168), and her attempt to portray them in her literary project. The first element that creates this connection between the story and real life appears at the very beginning of the story: “In the north of Ireland there is a large, beautiful lake called Lough Neagh” (395). This lake located at the west of Belfast is the “the largest freshwater lake in the British Isles” (McCutcheon, 597), and it is the setting for the underwater kingdom of the tale. This lake was of great importance in Irish history, and its significance is the reason why it appears in Irish mythological legends. Since the middle of the tenth century its location was considered strategic, as Lough Neagh touched “five of the six counties of the present political unit of Northern Ireland [...], suggesting and facilitating canal construction” (McCutcheon, 597). Therefore, although “The Girl from under the Lake” is mainly fictional, its setting is based

on a real-life lake in Ireland. Due to the literary genre of this story, its historical content is quite limited compared to the social issues that it deals with. Mulholland also mentions in her tale other aspects of the Irish historical and political background that do not remain unnoticed. An example of historical reference is seen when Nira refers to a house that “was burned by Cromwell’s soldiers” (572). Like Lough Neagh, Oliver Cromwell played a major role in shaping Irish military history, and both elements were important at different periods of English expansion into Ireland. On the one hand, Sir Henry Sidney, an English statesman, contributed to the Tudor government of Queen Elizabeth I by conquering Lough Neagh (and renaming it Lough Sidney) in the sixteenth century, when it was under the control of the O’Neills (Mitchel and Morton). On the other hand, Cromwell represents the English conquest of Ireland a century later. Thus, the historical figure of Cromwell has no relevance to the plot of the story, but mentioning him as someone who caused the destruction of a family home contributes to Irish collective memory, in which he is generally perceived unfavourably by the Irish population. So, Lough Neagh and Cromwell being mentioned in the text are symbolic of the resentment and pain held by the Irish against the violent control they suffered for centuries by England. Moreover, the author’s Catholic and Nationalist ideology is reflected in her literature. For this reason, “The Girl from under the Lake” can be interpreted from a more political point of view. At the time when this tale was written, in the late nineteenth century, the issue of Home Rule petitions was widely discussed in Ireland because of its political significance. Nationalists wanted to accept a Home Rule in which Ireland would have a self-government within the United Kingdom, which would give the country some independence to have more control over its affairs (Dicey, 4). In Mulholland’s story, Nira’s desires to be independent and live in the world of the surface instead of being controlled in the underwater world can be related to the Nationalists’ desires for Ireland to be independent. For instance, when the water-fairy tells Nira about the necklace, she states that because of it, Runa “may be obliged to leave you in peace upon earth” (398). This sense of protection that the necklace would bring Nira in the upper world resembles the partial sense of freedom that Home Rule would bring to Ireland. So, Mulholland introduces in “The Girl from under the Lake” subtle geographical, historical and political elements related to real life so that readers feel closer to it despite the fact that it belongs to a fictional genre such as the folktale.

Rosa Mulholland did not only address historical issues in her literature, but also various social aspects that interested her. She wrote feminist literature to depict what “Irish girlhood” (Cahill, 167) was like, and to prove that “Irish girls play an important role in the imagining of nation” (Cahill, 168). In fact, Mulholland’s nationalism is intertwined with her social exploration of “the intersections between girlhood and nation in a [...] Catholic context” (Cahill, 168). In her view, the traditional roles and expectations of men and women were heavily influenced by the traditional models of family advocated by the Catholic church. For example, marriage was the expected future of women according to the social rules. This can be seen when three men debate about who should marry Nira, arguing: “I shall marry Nira, and she shall be mistress” (456), without knowing her opinion on the matter; or when Pedro tells Nira “you will marry some noble husband and go away with him” (540). Moreover, her literary works are highly critical of gender inequality. There are several moments in which this feminist inclination can be perceived in “The Girl from under the Lake”. One of them is the subtle references to women’s freedom and men’s control over woman that Mulholland includes in her tale. For instance, Runa says “I shall be my own mistress, and have no one to torment me!” (399). “The Girl from under the Lake” also includes frequent references to the traditional gender values of Irish society. The roles and expectations of women are frequently mentioned, for example, when “Nira was taught to sew, and to knit, and to cook, and to make herself generally useful, and, according to the physician’s advice, she was not allowed to study much” (455). However, the tale’s female characters present a feminist attitude, and they do not try to meet societal expectations. The best character to illustrate this is Runa, who prioritises her desires and aims over marriage: “she would not marry Pedro till she had forced all the world to see and acknowledge what a great and glorious princess she was; how beautiful, how powerful, how wealthy” (629). Nira also represents this feminist attitude, as she is a young girl who comes out of the lake in which she lived and succeeds on her own merit in the world in which she wanted to live. But the character of Nira can also be interpreted as a nationalist metaphor for the success that the country of Ireland could achieve if it fulfilled their independence purposes.

In “The Girl from under the Lake”, fiction is the resource that allows Mulholland to deal with all the controversial topics explained above in an open and direct manner. For instance, the fact that the “feminine consciousness” (Cahill, 168) and the subtle

political critique of the story is provided by a mermaids' story, allows the author to defend them openly. The author refers to this freedom provided by fiction in the plot of the tale. In the story, Nira gives a pile of books for Pedro to read, and she tells him "that, if he only wished it, he might have a kingdom of happiness in his own mind, which nobody could take from him" (539). This quote perfectly illustrates the freedom of expression that fantasy brings to literature, since being so closely related to the reader's own mind, authors can use it as a mechanism to escape reality.

"The Mermaid Legend" is a short story in which the author also includes several aspects of the Irish historical and social context. The main historical situations that affect the plot of this story are the influence of Catholicism on the life of Irish people, and the Irish and English rivalry that had been going on for centuries. However, as in "The Girl from under the Lake", these situations are not described in a direct way. Instead, they are subtly integrated into the plot. For instance, the division that Catholic and Protestant tendencies caused in Irish society in previous centuries was still present in the nineties. So, when the English barmaid explains how she is very different from her husband, she clarifies that this difference is related "not just [to] the old English Irish bit, or the Protestant Catholic bit, or whatever" (169), because these are the differences that the Irish population was used to seeing. In fact, the main character and narrator of this short story is an English Protestant woman who does not live up to the Catholic expectations of women. For example, both women, the barmaid and the mermaid, "represent the unwomanly—and un-Irish—practice of deserting children and husbands, suggesting an alternate tradition in pre-Christian antiquity for Irish women than Catholic maternal Mariology" (Moloney, 2). This practice is considered non-Catholic because, as Mary was the mother of Jesus, women were expected to take care of their children. This explains why what was expected of women in the nineteenth century were closely related to the traditional Catholic values.

Therefore, one of the main themes of this short story is how women challenge their social roles and expectations. The barmaid is a woman that is "unsuited to life in the rural west and eventually deserts her two children and her husband to return to life as an English barmaid" (Moloney, 2), and the mermaid of the legend has the same feeling of not belonging to her familiar environment. In short, they are two women "unsuited to domestic life" (Moloney, 2). Instead of remaining in their home, which was expected of

them, they make the controversial decision of abandoning it. In addition, the “subtle and implicit discussion of contemporary marital relations” (Graham, 64), as well as the feminist characters that she included in the story, were used by the author to denounce other complicated situations that women had to live through in some marital relationships. For instance, she portrayed the control that the male figure of the family was supposed to have over the woman, but instead of writing about it directly, she says that the mermaid “cannot go back to her own form and to the sea as her husband has hidden her cloak” (Tallone, 158), preventing her from escaping her unhappy life.

The previous quote shows how fiction is used to expose social realities in a subtle way that would prevent censorship of the literary works in which they appear. In “The Mermaid Legend”, as well as in “The Girl from under the Lake”, the mermaid is a literary relief to explore deeper themes. The best example to illustrate this is how Ní Dhuibhne deals with the subject of divorce. At the time when the author published *Eating Women is not Recommended* (1991) divorce was still illegal in Ireland, as “divorce legislation was introduced in 1997” (Fahley et al., 127). For this reason, divorce was frowned upon in Ireland at the time, so it was a very controversial topic. But the use of fiction and fantasy in the legend embedded in this short story allows the author to depict two cases of women who want to leave their home to move into a habitat where they belong. The fact that this polemic situation is being experienced by a fantastic figure like a mermaid, makes it easier for the writer to talk about it more freely without trying to be ‘politically correct’. Moreover, the intertextuality of this story facilitates the discussion of the difficulties of divorce in reality. In the mermaid legend, she does not hesitate to abandon her partner and return to the sea, where she belongs. But in the main story, the author shows that marital separation was more complicated than it appeared to be in the fantasy legend. She makes this connection with the expression “no divorce across the water, of course” (173), stating that it was a solution that at the time was totally unimaginable, as it was not accepted by society. However, in the mermaid world ‘across the water’, women did have this option. Thus, the mermaid represents the desire to escape from the oppression that some women had to experience in everyday life, and actually escape from it rather than remain in it.

In *The Fire Starters*, Jan Carson depicts the historical context of the novel in a much more direct way compared to the other two stories. In this case, she attempts to convey some of the consequences that the Troubles had on Northern Ireland sixteen years after

they finished. Due to this conflict, “the North of Ireland is still in numerous ways a place marked by instability” (McCann, 280), especially in “economic, social, and psychological terms” (McCann, 280). This instability is largely due to the division of the Irish population that ended up causing the Troubles. This division is mainly between Protestantism and Catholicism, and what was at first considered a religious difference, ended up being a social and cultural division as well. In the novel, Carson alludes to this division in several ways. One example is the metaphor of the football match. In this scene, there is a peaceful summer setting in which people are enjoying the nice weather. This atmosphere might represent the calm that followed the stress of the Troubles. However, in this scenario, men are watching a World Cup football match between Ireland and England, and the author reiterates indirectly portrays with irony how this match symbolises the division of the population of the country, and how this division resulted in violence: “The people here are particularly fond of football because it is a game of two sides and involves kicking” (20). In addition, people were not neutral in the conflict: “There are two sides to everything here, especially football. Everyone is obliged to pick a side and stick” (21). She further discusses how the notions of winning and losing gained importance among the Irish population in the post-Troubles period, because the competitiveness had political undertones. In Belfast, this situation was particularly complex, as half of the population supported the Irish team and the other half supported the English team, depending on their nationalist or unionist views. Carson ironically refers to this stating that one side of the citizens have won, “which means, on the other side of the city, they have lost” (21).

The main difference between this novel and the other two stories is that the main social aspects that it deals with are not related to gender issues, but to the psychological consequences that the Troubles had on the Irish population, and to the importance of historical memory so that the traumatic events of the past are not repeated. First, Carson portrays the mental health issues that the Troubles left on the Irish population, especially post-traumatic stress. This can be seen for instance when Jonathan keeps meeting men who come to his doctor’s office and “still have dreams about the vile things they did back in the seventies and eighties” (198), which included common elements such as “Guns. Bombs. Beatings. Fear” (199). She focused much of her story on the psychological consequences of the troubles because, since the end of the conflict, “there has been a dramatic increase in suicide rates, with Northern Ireland suffering consistently higher

rates than the rest of the United Kingdom” (Allen, 28). For this reason, the plot of the novel focuses so much on the importance of this type of conflict for the mental health of the population. It also highlights the fact that a large part of the population that still suffers from these problems “feel unable to communicate” them (Allen, 28). Moreover, Carson refers throughout the novel to the importance that historical memory has and the problems that forgetting conflicts of the past can entail. For instance, she expresses the fear that the lack of historical memory about the Troubles can lead to the repetition of similar events, as she states that it is “an action that can be done to people over and over again” (17). Carson explores in *The Fire Starters* the possibility that the nature of the Troubles, i.e., violence, is hereditary, and she represents it in “Jonathan and Sammy’s relationship with their children” (Green, 59). For instance, Sammy believes that violence is hereditary, as he says that it is “a passed-down thing, like heart disease or cancer. It’s a kind of disease” (48). Sammy even assumes his guilt for his son Mark’s violence: “Mark has caught it from him. It’s not his fault, none of it, not even the fires or the people who have been hurt” (48). This concern explains “Sammy’s character and declining mental health” (Allen, 26).

The legacy of the Troubles is a very difficult issue to address, and “fiction has potential to inspire empathy and allows us to explore these subjects, with less consideration for the political and communal realities that can hinder progress” (Allen, 25). In *The Fire Starters*, as it is a novel that belongs to the literary genre of magical realism, the reality of the conflict is interwoven with supernatural elements, such as Sophie’s mother being a mermaid. This can be seen for instance when Carson explores the topic of the hereditary nature of violence: “we see the theme of passing violence to their children with Sammy’s narrative playing out in a realist vein, and Jonathan’s in a mythological, magic realist one” (Allen, 26). Another example is the presence of the Unfortunate Children, whose special powers have been discussed to represent the ‘power’ of children to challenge “the future of Northern Ireland” (Green, 59). However, it is necessary to acknowledge that “arts, in particular literature and theatre, have increasingly become a counter-space [to the tense political atmosphere of the previous decades] where innovation, imagination, and creativity have perhaps never been greater” (McCann, 280). So, the use of fiction and fantasy in literary publications dealing with realistic subjects, such as the Troubles in Carson’s novel, attempts “to put something else on the literary

map beyond the trauma and horror, brutality and betrayal which have, understandably, long been omnipresent” (McCann, 280). Thus, in *The Fire Starters*, fantasy is also a resource that provides a literary relief to explore deeper and harsher themes.

## CONCLUSION

The three literary works analysed in this dissertation share the use of fantastic elements, especially the figure of the mermaid. In all of them, fantasy and fiction are used as a device that facilitates authors to represent different historical and social aspects that they considered too polemical or harsh to be portrayed in a fully realistic style. This supports the initial hypothesis of this paper, according to which fantasy is used in literary works to allow authors to deal with certain controversial social situations more freely than if they were to write about them in a more realistic way.

These fictional literary works used the figure of the mermaid with the ultimate intention of giving rise to social criticism. The mermaids in Mulholland, Ní Dhuibhne and Carson's texts are the result of the evolution of migratory legends and other tales written in the past, such as Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid". However, despite having similar sources of influence, each author employs different narrative strategies to use the figure of the mermaid to portray rough situations that were happening in Ireland.

However, these three stories have in common that they mix realistic and fantastic elements inspired by the experiences and context of the three authors. In "The Girl from under the Lake", Rosa Mulholland includes gender issues that were present in Irish society when she wrote this fairy tale, such as the roles and expectations of women, or family relationships. But the critical element of these situations is mitigated because they are experienced by a fantastic character who was originally a mermaid. "The Mermaid Legend" also addresses some of the gender issues that Mulholland wrote about, but in this case, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne focuses her short story on the issue of divorce, which was a very controversial topic at the time because it was still illegal. She also mentions some historical issues, such as the Irish and English rivalry, and the influence of Catholicism. However, she also reduces the critical impact of these themes with the parallel legend of the mermaid. And, lastly, *The Fire Starters* carries more historical weight than the other two stories, as the novel's setting is based on the post-Troubles era and the social division that the conflict caused in Northern Ireland. However, Jan Carson focuses her novel on the psychological consequences that the Troubles had on the Irish population, and the fear that this conflict will be repeated again. As the term 'magical realism' suggests, the

fantastic elements of *The Fire Starters* counterbalance the seriousness of the harsh real-life situations it depicts. So, in all three stories, fantasy is an escape mechanism for the complicated realities portrayed in them that could not be openly addressed among the Irish population.

Therefore, from the analysis of these three Irish literary works it is concluded that “The Girl from under the Lake” reflects Mulholland’s feminist and nationalist views, “The Mermaid Legend” reflects the Ni Dhuibhne’s social opinion on divorce and family roles, and *The Fire Starters* reflects Carson’s concern for the psychological impact of political conflicts on the population. All of them use fantasy to express their ideals and denounce these harsh social realities that they consider unfair, proving that fiction, and fantasy in particular, has a deeper purpose in literature than simply entertaining readers.



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