Universidad de Valladolid

Facultad de Filosofía y Letras

Máster en Estudios Ingleses Avanzados

'Everything changes into something else': Representations of the Irish Family in Claire Keegan's *Foster* and *Small Things Like These*

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Departamento de Filología Inglesa

2024-2025

The work presented in this MA thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original and my own work, except as acknowledged in the text. The work in this thesis has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master in Advanced English Studies:
Languages and Cultures in Contact

to
Universidad de Valladolid

by
Sandra Gracia Casado

June 2025

Approved
Dra. María José Carrera de la Red

Resumen

Este Trabajo de Fin de Máster estudia las novelas cortas de Claire Keegan *Foster* (2010) y *Small Things Like These* (2021) desde un punto de vista literario y sociológico. Se explora cómo Keegan emplea y critica los roles familiares tradicionales irlandeses en las obras, que reflejan el legado arraigado de los valores patriarcales, la normalización del abandono institucional, y la complicidad social en la Irlanda de los años 80. Usando la sociología histórica y la teoría de familia, el trabajo analiza cómo ambas novelas se centran en familias rurales corrientes al tiempo que destacan figuras poco convencionales, desde el padre sensible a la madre independiente y la niña traumatizada. *Foster* sigue la breve fuga de una niña desde la negligencia a un hogar cariñoso, ofreciendo una alternativa a las narrativas de infancia centradas en el trauma a través del poder redentor del afecto y los cuidados. En el caso de *Small Things*, el amor de un padre por sus hijas y su encuentro por casualidad con una joven víctima le llevan tanto a enfrentarse al abuso institucional como a desarrollar un despertar moral. El trabajo propone que las dos novelas de Keegan subvierten los valores tradicionales y sugiere que actos pequeños de compasión en la familia pueden desafiar las injusticias sistémicas, así como crear caminos hacia el cambio social.

Palabras clave

Literatura irlandesa, Claire Keegan, Dinámicas familiares, Patriarcado, Sociología histórica, Estudios familiares

Abstract

This master's thesis performs a study of Claire Keegan's novellas *Foster* (2010) and *Small Things Like These* (2021) from literary and sociological points of view. The thesis explores how Keegan employs and criticizes Irish traditional family roles in the two novellas, which reflect the legacy of entrenched patriarchal values, normalized institutional neglect, and widespread social complicity in 1980s Ireland. With the use of historical sociology and family studies, the dissertation analyzes how both novellas focus on ordinary rural families while highlighting unconventional figures, from the sensitive father to the independent mother and the traumatized child. *Foster* follows a young girl's short-lived escape from neglect into a caring home, offering an alternative to trauma-centered childhood narratives through the redemptive power of affection and care. As for *Small Things*, in it a father's love for his daughters and a chance encounter with a victimized girl prompt him to confront institutional abuse and awaken morally. The dissertation posits that Keegan's novellas subvert traditional values, and suggests that small acts of compassion in the family can challenge systemic injustices and chart paths towards social change.

Keywords

Irish literature, Claire Keegan, Family dynamics, Patriarchy, Historical sociology, Family studies

Table of contents.

1. Introduction

1.1.Topic and author.

The institution of the family is most pervasive across cultures and generations. Family structures or their lack determine the identity of the individuals that belong to it, as well as the formation of the society that they inhabit. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that themes of family are often central in literary production, as they can be a source of support and conflict for the characters involved. These dynamics within the family, as most themes in literature, can reveal truths of human nature that move the narrative forward and determine characters and their identities. Intersections between literature and the field of cultural studies constitute in this case a fascinating opportunity for research: an analysis of the representations of families in literature can become a source of valuable knowledge into the cultural values and conflicts of a given society, reflecting history, values and their evolution. After all, in the words of anthropologist Oscar Lewis, the family is the site where "interrelationships between cultural and individual factors in the formation of personality can best be seen" (471). In the realm of Irish literature, brimming with vestiges of a turbulent history and its complex tradition, an analysis of the family can be useful to understand Irish identity as a whole.

This thesis studies two works by author Claire Keegan, who, with her "sparse and effective" style (Holmqvist), has become one of the most relevant Irish authors in the short story genre. The Irish families in her works become a representation of the frequent contradictions present in Irish society, bringing to light tensions between individuals and culture and reflecting the broader social and political landscape of Ireland. Among Keegan's body of work, the two novellas analyzed in the dissertation are *Foster* (2010) and *Small Things Like These* (2021), both set in 1980s Ireland, which follow two very different families that navigate a series of conflicts: an unnamed, abused girl's coming-

of-age summer away from her chaotic home and a family man's conscience awakening regarding the Magdalene Laundries.

This dissertation presents how Keegan's work, through her rich depictions of familial relationships, gives a unique perspective on rural Irish families during a time of social change in regards to culture, politics, gender, and more. The portrayals of families in *Foster* and *Small Things Like These*, influenced by Irish history and society, reflect in turn the nation's cultural and social evolution, and contribute to conversations on family dynamics and the Irish identity. The examination of these experiences, which are intimate and at the same time universal, has Keegan's work encourage reflection on the relationship between family and nation.

1.2.Literature review.

The previous scholarship on Claire Keegan's works has, for the most part, fit inside one of three categories: feminist critical analysis of female themes present in her characters and plots; Keegan's distinct literary style and use of storytelling techniques; and analyses of the different forms that parenting takes in her stories.

In the case of what feminist critique has said about Keegan, articles like Marisol Morales Ladrón's "Gender Relations and Female Agency in Claire Keegan's *Antarctica*" (2021) have examined the portrayal of gender dynamics in her short story collections. According to Morales Ladrón's research, society as an obstacle for women's independence is a recurrent theme of Keegan's body of work. In *Antarctica*, these constraints are particularly remarkable in stories where women, fighting to reclaim control over their bodies and desires, are shut down by overarching social pressures. Morales Ladrón situates these narratives within the larger context of Ireland's transition into the global stage, suggesting that as the country modernizes, gender-related struggles become more pronounced. Ultimately, Morales Ladrón concludes that Keegan's concern

lies with the "human sources of mischief, misfortune, and lack of love in a world governed by inequality and stagnant moral values" (290). It can be concluded from this that there exists feminist scholarship on Keegan's fiction that characterizes it by its depiction of not only gender struggles, also as the wider conditions that surround and propitiate them.

As for Keegan's techniques of storytelling, the most discussed in criticism is her command of the unsaid element. This strategy, defining of her writing style, is evaluated in Jytte Holmqvist's "Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These*: Expressing Truths in the Silence Between the Words" (2024). Holmqvist analyzes how Keegan's deliberate withholding of information from the reader, besides the ambiguity of interpretation associated with it, is not merely a stylistic choice; it is central to the story and meant to enhance its themes. Omitting detailed descriptions of the laundries in *Small Things*, for example, forces readers to face the horrors through emotion and the reaction (or non-reaction) characters have to them. In this way, Keegan's purposeful silences work to challenge the reader to consider the unspoken and the hidden, adding to the overall themes of the rest of the novel.

To follow with this, when it comes to portrayals of parenthood in Keegan's stories, scholarship has mostly focused on the relationships, which are often dysfunctional, between parents and their children in her work. A significant example can be the analysis of abusive parents in Vivian Valvano Lynch's article "'Families Can Be Awful Places': The Toxic Parents of Claire Keegan's Fiction" (2015). In this work, Lynch examines the depiction of 'toxic', or abusive, family dynamics in Keegan's stories, arguing that her representations of dysfunction critique the "idealized depiction of Irish family life" (2). While some of the characters suffering from these environments ultimately find peace or closure, most of their conflicts are left unresolved, reflecting the tragic reality of their circumstances. As a result, it is Lynch's conclusion that Keegan's portrayals offer a more

genuine, even though painful, representation of family relationships that confronts the ideals once enshrined of the Irish family. To Lynch, this effort means to destabilize this heavily ingrained myth and encourage readers to reconsider the real nature of family bonds and abusive realities.

In summary, despite the extensive attention from scholars to Keegan's works in regards to her representations of women and parenthood as well as her literary style, there continue to exist noticeable gaps in the existing research. Namely, few articles have focused on the historical background that surrounds the stories in depth, and rarely apply family studies. With the use of these, this thesis provides a new understanding of Keegan's family dynamics as affected by their context.

1.3.Objectives.

This dissertation has as its main goal an exploration of the portrayals of family in Claire Keegan's novels *Foster* and *Small Things Like These* through the methodologies of historical sociology and family studies. With this established, the thesis seeks to achieve the following specific objectives:

1. Explore the historical evolution of the Irish family. With theory belonging to historical sociology, this dissertation analyzes how the family, understood as a social institution, has transformed over time in rural Ireland, how these transformations are depicted by Keegan, and how they affect the stories' narratives.
2. Study the influence of Irish history and society on families. The thesis places the families in *Foster* and *Small Things* into their historical, economical and societal context in order to understand why they are the way they are.
3. Focus on the representation of family members. Through special attention paid to the characters of the father, the mother, and their children in each of the two

novels, this dissertation draws from family studies to understand their characterization and what they mean not just for these two novellas in particular, but for commentaries on society as a whole.

With these objectives in mind, this thesis aims to provide a nuanced and fresh understanding of Claire Keegan's representations of families and their lives, using historical and sociological perspectives.

1.4.Theoretical framework

This thesis's theoretical framework follows two approaches: historical sociology of Ireland, exploring what the characteristics of a culture reveal about the families that inhabit it; and family studies from an anthropological perspective, which examine what families reflect about the cultural contexts they are a part of. When they are combined, these two approaches give a solid framework upon which to analyze the intersections between family life and cultural identity that are at the center of this thesis.

1.4.1. Historical sociology

The discipline of historical sociology focuses on the interaction between historical events and settings with social structures, with the goal of tracing social changes and their impact on structures as, for example, families. For this dissertation, historical sociology is effective to understand the adaptation and evolution of rural Irish families through changes in their surrounding society, politics, and economy. The main references for this approach are two handbooks on historical sociology: Richard Lachmann's *What is Historical Sociology?* (2013) and the *Handbook of Historical Sociology* edited by Gerard Delanty and Engin F Isin (2003).

First, Richard Lachmann's book serves as an introduction to the discipline of historical sociology as distinct from history and conventional sociology. Lachmann documents the evolution of historical sociology through theory and the use of case

studies, such as state formation, to explain its methods of analysis. In the chapter in relation to the family, he presents it as a historical and social construct that is shaped by broader structures of power; namely, gender and economic systems. Additionally, it highlights how family structure and roles, particularly those based on gender, have evolved in response to wider shifts like those of labor and state organization. The chapter also emphasizes how family dynamics are not something that can be studied in isolation, and that to write historical sociology about them requires understanding "the interactions between familiar, economic, and political structures" (113-14). The central conclusion to this is that the family is not a static institution and is instead shaped over time by transformations in society and economy. Awareness of this is key to the development of this thesis, given it studies the influence of multiple historical processes on the families written by Keegan.

Second, the *Handbook of Historical Sociology* is a volume of multiple authors exploring historical sociology's tradition and methods. Across its several chapters, it presents perspectives on diverse themes such as globalization and modernity. In connection with this dissertation, it elaborates an analysis of gender and patriarchy as two forces that evolve together with political and economic changes. The handbook's contributors study how patriarchal institutions, including the family, change and shift through processes of modernization, the rise of capitalism, and the development of the modern state. Pavla Miller's chapter in particular, "Gender and Patriarchy in Historical Sociology", argues that households have historically functioned as an "integral part of social governance" (339). This chapter includes details relevant to this thesis, like the emergence of the male provider model that linked gender roles to the organization of labor and state. This approach establishes the family as central to state power reproduction, which is important for this thesis's conception of the family.

To close this, historical sociology is a valuable framework for the analysis of the evolution of rural Irish families, which are situated within broader contexts of social, political, and economic transformations. Because this discipline emphasizes the connection of societal structures, it allows for an understanding of how families adapt to outer influences over time. Richard Lachmann's book focuses on the influence of power structures on institutions like the family through both theoretical grounding and concrete examples. In a similar way, the *Handbook* expands on this by showcasing how families and patriarchal models are vital for wider systems of social organization. Together, these texts provide the thesis with a theoretical foundation that allows it to explore the context that surrounds *Foster* and *Small Things Like These*, and support its focus on families as institutions that are historically and socially embedded in their context.

1.4.2. Family studies

The methodology of family studies focuses on the analysis of family structure and its roles, emphasizing the comprehension of how these elements function in specific cultural and social contexts. When supported by anthropological theories, this approach can be suitable for research on family life across cultures and time periods. This study is supported by handbooks like Martine Segalen's *Historical Anthropology of the Family* (1986); as well as sources like Oscar Lewis's "An Anthropological Approach to Family Studies" (1950) and the article by Rudy Ray Seward et al. "Irish Families in the Twentieth Century: Exceptional or Converging?" (2005). These provide vital information in order to approach texts with an informed knowledge of families as reflective of societies.

To examine portrayals of family life in Keegan's fiction, Segalen's *Historical Anthropology of the Family* becomes a useful approach in order to understand the evolving structures and meanings of kinship. Segalen's work challenges the timeless family as a myth and focuses on the historical variability of family forms, which are

shaped by outer forces like society and economy. This perspective is crucial to the context of the two novellas under analysis, as it acts as a baseline upon which to question ideals of family in Keegan's writing. As the book expresses, the family configurations one is acquainted with are "simply one possible grouping in the whole range of cultures [. . .] neither better, more final or even necessarily really very different from other groupings" (Segalen 14). With this framing that encourages the reader to see the family as culturally specific as well as subject to change, Keegan's depictions of the family become clearer.

Within the discipline of family studies, Segalen's outlook permits a deeper questioning of the functioning of families as social constructs framed in larger historical and ideological frameworks. Segalen's historical anthropology is thus key to understanding how both *Foster* and *Small Things Like These* highlight how the family, far from being private, is dynamic and contested. With the use of her *Historical Anthropology*, this dissertation achieves insights on how Keegan's fiction resists romanticized notions of the Irish family and instead offers a more historically accurate and nuanced view.

As for the aforementioned articles, Oscar Lewis's foundational work calls for an anthropological perspective in the study of family dynamics and highlights the importance of considering the culture and environment that shape families. The paper claims that to study a culture through its families "enables one to get at the meaning of institutions both practical and theoretical" (470), a point of view that highlights the historical and social context where families are situated. For this thesis, Lewis's ideas are instrumental to place *Foster* and *Small Things* within a broader framework of society and culture.

As for the study by Seward et al., "Irish Families in the Twentieth Century: Exceptional or Converging?", it provides a sociological view of Irish family life with the

intention of determining whether Irish family structures are unique in their kind or whether they align with global trends of transformation. In its examination of sociological aspects ranging from marriage to intergenerational relationships, Irish families are compared to those in other Western societies and the conclusion is reached that major factors that once determined Irish family structures, such as "emigration, dominance of rural livelihoods and private-property relations, low incomes, the Constitution of 1937, and the Roman Catholic Church are less powerful today" (423).

Through the combination of these two methodologies of historical sociology and family studies, this dissertation offers a fresh perspective on how *Foster* and *Small Things Like These* reflect the Irish family as a social institution, unique to culture and subject to change. With a wider understanding of the forces determining rural Irish families in the 1980s, as well as a grasp on family structures, this thesis can provide an explanation of the realities of Irish family life in the two novellas.

1.5.Structure.

This dissertation's analysis is divided into four parts. The first, "Historical context in *Foster* and *Small Things Like These*: impact of the 1980s in Ireland on the depicted families", provides details on the background surrounding the two novellas, characterized by changes between traditional and contemporary family models and the impact of generational trauma. The second, "The figure of the father", focuses on the two fathers in each novel, John Kinsella and Bill Furlong, and how their depictions defy expectations of traditional Irish fatherhood. The third section, "The figure of the mother", carries out the same analysis, this time with Edna Kinsella and Eileen Furlong, in order to understand their complex characterization. As for the fourth and last section, "Representations of children", it studies the young girls at the center of each of the two novellas and the message of their portrayal as agents of action and redemption.

2. Historical context in *Foster* and *Small Things Like These*: impact of 1980s Ireland on the depicted families.

The stories under scrutiny in this thesis, *Foster* and *Small Things Like These*, share a setting in the early to mid-1980s: *Foster* takes place in 1981, whilst *Small Things* is set in 1985. Both novellas focus on families inhabiting rural Ireland –Wexford and Waterford Counties, respectively–, with *Foster* following the Kinsella family and *Small Things* centered on the Furlongs. The places where the stories are set are significant regarding time and place, yet they are also significant in how they reflect the cultural and social dynamics of Irish families during a pivotal moment in the country's history. According to Lindsey Earner-Byrne, Irish families were seen as "inherently dysfunctional by almost all commentators until the 1970s" (642). This notion of dysfunction, however, becomes challenged gradually during the late nineteenth century, a shift which began to make itself known by the time the events in *Foster* and *Small Things* take place. While both stories occur after the 1970s, they nevertheless share a deep connection to the cultural and familial structures of earlier decades.

During the decade of the 1980s, Ireland underwent a complex and contentious transformation determined by the tensions between the process of modernization and rooted traditionalism. As outlined by Brian Girvin in "Ireland Transformed? Modernisation, Secularisation and Conservatism since 1973" (2018), the country was still perceived as a "poor predominantly Catholic country on the periphery of Europe with a conservative-nationalist political culture" (407). This context shaped the landscape in political and social terms, as efforts towards liberal reform often encountered strong opposition. Ireland's "continuing influence of traditional values that obstructed liberal and progressive initiatives" (407) meant that, even though economic and cultural changes began to take hold following Ireland's inclusion into the European Economic

Community, major institutions continued to wield significant power, particularly, the Catholic Church. Girvin notes that "surveys and opinion polls suggest that an important division appeared in Ireland during the 1970s between liberals and conservatives. The controversy over contraception highlighted these divisions" (418), marking a key in the broader struggle over Ireland's future. Further problems, like the Magdalene laundries scandal and the pervasive stigma associated with children born to unwed mothers, were responsible for perpetuating patterns of institutional abuse towards vulnerable groups of people, mainly women and their children. Therefore, despite a growing intention to reform the country towards more modern models, the Catholic Church's prevalence and significance (418) ensured the road towards a secularized, liberal Ireland in the 1980s was slow and difficult.

The decade of the 1980s in Ireland was a time of determinant changes, both at a social and political level, which directly impacted the structure and values of families. These changes parted from the persistence of fundamental beliefs about family and religion through substantial shifts in attitudes and conduct (Earner-Byrne 671). Consequently, during this period, there was an escalating conflict between the deep-rooted values of tradition and the rising expectations of modernity. Once considered a beacon of stability, the rural Irish family began to transform, mirroring the changes in society. Both *Foster* and *Small Things* employ the context of rural 1980s Ireland not as a backdrop, but as a means to explore the tensions and challenges faced by families during a time of cultural revolution. In each of these two works, the setting enhances its characters' struggles with tradition, change and identity, and offer an exploration of changing dynamics in Irish society.

2.1.The 1980s in *Foster*.

To begin with, the 1980s setting in *Foster* will be discussed. *Foster* chronicles the

coming-of-age of a young girl raised in a chaotic household sent to live with her mother's relatives, the childless Kinsellas, for a summer. During that time, the girl (who remains nameless for the length of the story) discovers affection unlike anything she has ever known before eventually, and regrettably, returning to her birth home by the end of the summer. The space in-between inhabited by the girl, who does not belong fully to either place at first, represents her growth during a time of transition, both personal (the girl's emotional development) and national (mirroring larger socio-political changes occurring in the country).

Firstly, *Foster*'s 1980s setting constitutes a period of Irish history that was marked by intense political turmoil, of which the 1981 hunger strikes carried out by IRA prisoners are one of many examples. Keegan introduces this context into the novella subtly, allowing the reader to infer the period rather than stating it in an explicit way. The specific reference appears as the girl is overhearing the news: "'They said on the early news that another striker is dead' (*Foster* 31)". The technique used to insert the setting grounds the narrative in a specific time and reflects how national events permeate into everyday life. Furthermore, this subtle instance relates to the personal coming-of-age journey of the girl, whose struggle for identity can be stated to reflect Ireland's search for direction during a politically charged moment.

Secondly, the changing family demographics in Ireland during the 1980s provide an essential explanation for the composition of the two households depicted in the novella. During the period between the 1980s and 1990s, average household sizes in Ireland declined significantly, from 4.1 people to 3.1 (Seward et al., 417). This change becomes perceptible with the contrast between the girl's birth family and the Kinsella household: her birth home, which she shares with many siblings, is large and chaotic, whereas her foster home, that consists only of her and the Kinsella couple, offers a quieter

environment. The girl notes the difference: the Kinsella house is "a different type of house," where there is "room, and time to think" (*Foster* 13). This 'room' is both literal and metaphorical, and symbolizes the emotional and physical space that the Kinsellas' home provides for the girl. The serenity of this setting gives the girl the opportunity to grow and to experience affection, which is an experience not available to her in her overcrowded birth home. Thus, Keegan uses these contrasting households to reflect broader demographic and cultural shifts taking place in Ireland.

Thirdly, the transformation of gender roles and change in household power structured in 1980s Ireland is reflected in the differing dynamics between the girl's two families. The traditional patriarchal values still prevalent in rural Ireland are embodied in her birth family: her father, Dan, exerts authoritarian control, something captured in the power struggles between him and Edna Kinsella as she hands him rhubarb and it falls to the ground: "he waits for her to pick it up, to hand it to him. She waits for him to do it. Neither one of them will budge" (14). This moment, if brief, encapsulates gender hierarchies and power dynamics. Moreover, the girl's unnamed mother is heavily burdened with household labor: "with my mother it is all work: us, the buttermaking, the dinners, the washing up and getting up and getting ready" (13), whilst her father neglects his responsibilities and gambles away important assets for the family ("my father lost our red Shorthorn in a game of forty-five", 3). This family is pervaded by instances of emotional neglect and unhappiness, as seen in the girl's detached comments: "though I know she wants neither, wonder if my mother will have a girl or a boy this time" (26). Similarly, her father has never shown her physical affection, as she notes he has never held her hand (61). The family dynamics present in the girl's birth home reflect the rigid, often dysfunctional gender roles of the time, which were beginning to be challenged.

In sharp contrast, the Kinsellas represent a more progressive, equal model of

family life, which is consistent with shifting social attitudes emerging in late twentieth-century Ireland. Their marriage is marked by mutual respect, emotional openness, and shared responsibility, which are qualities less present in older generational models. For example, Edna's insistence that the girl only needs "minding" (36) points towards an empathetic approach to parenting. Likewise, Edna promotes emotional transparency: "'Where there's a secret,' she says, 'there's shame, and shame is something we can do without'" (21). Her efforts reflect a modern parenting philosophy, valuing communication and trust. Furthermore, the couple are a model of a loving, equal relationship: the girl notes they share a bed, implying her parents do not (17), speak affectionately of one another, and demonstrate support. Edna describes John as "not always easy but hardly ever wrong" (49), while John refers to Edna as "too good [. . .] She wants to find the good in others" (64). The Kinsellas's stable, caring partnership is an example of the changing ideals of marriage and family in Ireland during this era and contrasts with the dysfunction in the girl's birth home.

In conclusion, *Foster*'s apparently subtle use of its historical setting becomes a reflection of the shift from old to new family dynamics in Ireland during a time of change, connecting with its main character's growth. Keegan reflects, through the two contrasting families that the girl lives with in the novel and the girl's individual development, the changing nature of family structures and relationships in Ireland throughout the 1980s. Therefore, the setting of *Foster* is integral to its story and its exploration of change, growth and belonging.

2.2.The 1980s in *Small Things Like These.*

First and foremost, *Small Things Like These* is set in 1985, a year marked by high rates of emigration: during this time, many young people left Ireland searching for better work opportunities abroad, contributing to a sense of national instability. This year is made

explicitly clear: “it was 1985, and the young people were emigrating, leaving for London and Boston, New York” (*Small Things* 14). Furthermore, the cultural atmosphere is also remarked through references to major international events, such as the Live Aid concert (22); this emphasizes the growing global awareness and social consciousness of the era. Details such as these help frame the broader political and social climate, creating a backdrop more overtly developed than the one in *Foster* and of vital significance for the novel’s broader themes. By embedding these references, Keegan ties real-world Ireland to the novella’s events and charges the story with realism.

In second place, a social stigma associated with children who were born out of wedlock in twentieth century Ireland plays a pivotal role in the novel’s themes and aids to its emotional impact. The birth rate of children born to unmarried mothers “gradually increased throughout the twentieth century in the north and south of Ireland” (Earner Byrne 668), and many of these children, like Bill Furlong, were subject to marginalization as a result of the negative moral perception of their mothers. As one of these illegitimates, Furlong has long internalized this stigma, which deeply influenced his sense of identity and worth even into adulthood. As Furlong recollects his past, he implies not believing “he mattered as much as any other child” (21), a personal history that contributes to explain the emotional weight behind his decision to rescue Sarah, a young woman, from the convent. Without an understanding of this social context, the internal conflict that Furlong faces and his final decision would lose their meaning.

In last place, in order to comprehend the events in *Small Things* one must acknowledge the dominant role of the Catholic Church in 1980s Ireland, particularly in rural communities like the one depicted in the novella. The Church held an immense power over education, social services, and the sense of public morality, often silencing dissenting voices and perpetrating as well as enabling abuse. This influence of

Catholicism and its pressure had a "deep and lasting individual and social impact" (Martín Amor 84), and it is essential to grasp the reason why institutions like the Magdalene laundries, where women were enslaved and mistreated, could operate unchecked. In *Small Things*, the local convent's hold over the community is all-encompassing; as Bill is told, "these nuns have a finger in every pie" (*Small Things* 55). This pervasive control is precisely what allowed the horrors within the laundries, embodied in Sarah, to persist without intervention from neighbors. Without the Church's dominance, the enabling environment would not have existed.

To summarize, 1980s Ireland as a historical context is integral to *Small Things Like These*. From the challenges confronted by the children of single mothers to the oppressing power of the Catholic Church, both mechanisms that allowed the Magdalene laundries to exist, the events and themes of the novella are inextricably connected to the realities of Ireland at the time. Without this historical context, *Small Things* would lose much of its impact and all its sense, hence making the background vital for the narrative.

Overall, the 1980s settings in *Foster* and *Small Things Like These* are vital for each of the stories to develop and key to grasp the contemporary dynamics of Irish society during this time, as well as of the families living in it. Fictional narratives of the era become, therefore, "a vehicle through which to collectively process, come to terms with and recover from" this troubling time (Martín Amor 87). Keegan's setting choice is not a coincidence: she uses it to comment on the Irish society of the moment, and the family as affected by this society. In *Foster*, the contrasting family structures that the child protagonist navigates reflect Ireland's transition from old values to the new, as patriarchal values gave way to more egalitarian, emotionally supportive households. Meanwhile, the characters in *Small Things* confront their background of Catholic dominance, social stigma and institutional abuse, all of which determine the decisions for the best that its

hero takes. The decade of the 1980s in these two novellas is not decoration, but a force serving the development of the characters as much as the broader narratives framing them, hence allowing for an exploration of social change and the complexities of family life during the era.

3. The figure of the father in *Foster* and *Small Things Like These:* John Kinsella and Bill Furlong.

Fathers in Irish literature are, to put it mildly, complex figures. They have been depicted as symbols of the state, breadwinners, controllers, discipline-providers, absent, and more (Tully de Lope 22). Scholarship agrees with this literary depiction, as the Irish father has been described as the "patriarch and ruler of a family", someone whose function is not domestic and who provides "financial rather than emotional support" (Purvis 210). At large, fathers are expected to be symbols of strength and security, however they are either distant or entirely absent from the sphere of domesticity, their family role fulfilled through marriage and not caregiving (212). There exist explanations for this phenomenon; it can be argued that the model of the male breadwinner family, where wives and children depended on the husband's financial support, forms part of wider patterns of patriarchal family models (Miller 340). In spite of this, Keegan's depictions of fathers in *Foster* and *Small Things Like These* challenge these long-standing conventions. The respective father figures –Kinsella in *Foster*, and Furlong in *Small Things*– appear as layered and nurturing, and offer their daughters (biological or not) a kind of support extending beyond the financial, lacking the controlling dimension ascribed to Irish fathers. As they depart from traditional depictions of the patriarchal figure, Kinsella and Furlong emphasize the importance of compassion and emotional presence and suggest a more nuanced understanding of fatherhood in Irish literature.

3.1.John Kinsella in *Foster*.

This dissertation's analysis of father figures begins with *Foster*'s John Kinsella, the girl's foster father who becomes central to her experience of care and emotional growth associated with her coming of age. Kinsella lives with his wife Edna on a Co. Wexford farm, and is a distant relative of the girl and her temporary guardian when she is sent away

during her mother's pregnancy. As a father, Kinsella's behavior aligns with the change Segalen calls the contemporary "disappearance of the authoritarian father" (182): during the past few decades, fathers are statistically less controlling, and more caring. From the very outset of the novella, Kinsella's protective instincts over the girl are evident: when her biological father, as he leaves her in their care, suggests to the couple they can "work her" on the farm, he firmly refuses the idea: "Kinsella looks up. 'There'll be no need for any of that'" (Keegan 12). This moment, if brief, is decisive to establish Kinsella's role throughout the rest of the narrative; in his protection of the girl, he exercises care, and not authoritarian control.

As the story progresses, Kinsella is consistent in this protection of the girl. He insists that she presents herself properly for mass ("I'll not have her going as she went last week", 41); far from a correction, this signals he is committed to instilling in the girl self-respect and dignity. His guarding of her, therefore, is not limited to her physical wellbeing: it extends to her emotional and social development. Though such a care would align with the aforementioned conventional expectations of a patriarch, Kinsella transcends them by engaging in an active way with the girl's inner life and emotions.

Furthermore, Kinsella, beyond the role of protector, serves as a quiet but powerful mentor to the girl. Through domestic rituals of affirmation, such as timing her as she runs to retrieve letters from the Kinsellas' mailbox, he routinely praises the child's efforts. In doing so, he subtly but decisively builds her confidence and her sense of accomplishment. His praise of the child is continuous and heartfelt, from the records she achieves through her speed to acknowledgement of her abilities to scream across the fields: "I doubt there's a child in Wexford with a finer set of lungs" (30). What is more, Kinsella even helps the girl improve her reading skills: "I struggled with some of the bigger words but Kinsella kept his fingernail under each, patiently" (74). Scenes like these characterize him as a

man who is invested in the girl's future and demonstrates genuine affection. His acts of encouragement break with the role of the traditional Irish father, as Kinsella displays an emotional support that is usually reserved for mothers, exploring a new model of fatherhood.

Additionally, though also in the realm of emotional support, Kinsella becomes a source of valuable advice to the girl, contributing to her understanding of the world and herself and, in doing so, cementing his role as her father. Whether it is correcting toxic generalizations ("there's no two men the same", 33) or invaluable, profound advice for life ("'You don't ever have to say anything', he says. 'Always remember that as a thing you need never do'", 64), he is committed to countering the emotional neglect the girl internalized from her biological parents. Kinsella, hence, does not only provide the girl with practical insights, but also gives her tools that might serve her long after she leaves his care, helping her develop her autonomy and self-worth.

As a final note, one of the most touching demonstrations of Kinsella's fondness for the girl is his use of loving nicknames. He calls the unnamed girl Long-Legs on account of her height, Pearl, and most notably, the Gaeilge *a leanbh*, meaning "my child". The choice of words reflects the intimacy built between father and daughter. Despite the girl remaining unnamed and, therefore, unidentified through the story, by naming her Kinsella gives her an identity and a sense of belonging as part of his family.

In all, Kinsella is a role of emotional depth in *Foster*. His continuous protection, consistent encouragement, and ability to nurture the child's confidence and her autonomy reflect his departure from the emotionally detached, disciplinarian archetype associated with Irish fathers of the twentieth century, and break with the notions of the "male-dominated social order which literally involved the rule of fathers" (Miller 342).

3.2.Bill Furlong in *Small Things Like These*.

The second father figure analyzed in this thesis is Bill Furlong, main character of *Small Things Like These*. Husband to Eileen and father to five young girls, Furlong is a coal and timber merchant and, on a surface level, a normative provider figure who supports his family through labor. As the story progresses, Furlong's apparent archetype of the breadwinning, uninvolved father is challenged by his struggles with moral responsibility until he, in defiance of institutional cruelty, rescues a young girl, Sarah, from the laundry in the convent where she is being abused.

Much like Kinsella before him, Furlong demonstrates a strong sense of classic protectiveness over his daughters, particularly in regards to men. He expresses his anxiety about their future in a world he knows is dominated by men: "He imagined his girls getting big and growing up, going out into that world of men. Already he'd seen men's eyes following his girls" (Keegan 14). This moment of deep awareness of the vulnerabilities his daughters will face as they grow up reveals, as well, his desire to shield them from unwanted attention. Furlong's protectiveness is not passive, but active and ongoing. For instance, he asks his daughter Kathleen, who occasionally helps with bookkeeping at his business, about her wellbeing and whether she has been made uncomfortable: "'Have any of these men giving you guff while I was out?'" (31). This line is a reflection of Furlong's constant vigilance of his girls, something that together with his deep awareness of the challenges they face, reveals he does not care only for their physical safety but their emotional comfort and autonomy as well.

Quite importantly, the protectiveness exhibited by Furlong is not restricted to his daughters. He is equally aware of the ways in which the societal norms around him can undermine the worth of girls and women, perhaps on account of his background as the son of a single mother. This is best exemplified when the Mother Superior at the convent

remarks how much of a shame it is that Furlong did not have any sons, he does not hesitate: "'What have I against girls?' he went on. 'My own mother was a girl, once. And I dare say the same must be true of you and half of all belonging to us'" (39). These words simultaneously reject patriarchal thinking and affirm the value of not just his daughters, but women. His quiet, firm resistance to gendered expectations leads to a conclusion that Furlong is deeply protective of his children's physical wellbeing, but also of their dignity, social value, and emotional safety.

To continue, Furlong makes evident his deep love for his daughters, although in keeping with the novella's reserved emotional tone, his affection for the most part goes understated. Where Kinsella openly praised the girl in his care, Furlong's love is communicated through subtle observations and small, domestic gestures. As he watches his children, he feels a "deep, private joy that these children were his own" (13), and he proudly keeps mental lists of their accomplishments. Though he does not speak effusively, Furlong shows his affection through small actions, like rethreading Christmas ornaments given to him (45). However in line his restrained emotional expression might be with conventional models of Irish masculinity, for Furlong it does not imply a lack of feeling. Instead, his silence contains affection that defies stereotypes of emotionally distant fathers.

In addition to protection and love, Furlong's daughters are a source of great concern in his life and a decisive factor in his moral choices. One of the things he cares about the most, he tells the reader early in the novella, is "[to] stay on the right side of people, and to keep providing for his girls and see them getting on" (15). This statement places the upbringing of his daughters as his ambition and highlights that his role as provider is tied not just to the family's economy, but also to their success and comfort. Later, in conversation with Eileen, his wife, Furlong inquires about their state: "'Do you

think they're getting on all right, the girls?'" (23). From this it is deduced that Bill is, his time-consuming job notwithstanding, emotionally engaged and present in the lives of his family. Moreover, this same attentiveness is also evident in his treatment of Sarah, the girl from the convent, whom he asks directly "'Is there anything I can do for you, a leanbh? . . . 'All you need do is tell me'" (41). His use of the loving Irish endearment, much like in *Foster*, is deeply significant as it is a marker of empathy and, additionally, of his willingness to extend his paternal care beyond his daughters to make space for a vulnerable girl. By addressing her with this word, Furlong is including her within the family and adopting her, perhaps not legally but definitely emotionally. Thus, he demonstrates how fatherhood in Keegan's vision of *Small Things* is not confined to convention or blood ties, but is an act of care, empathy, and responsibility.

In sum, although Kinsella's character's break from the convention of the Irish father is more explicit, Furlong too challenges conventional portrayals of Irish fathers. Through his protectiveness, quiet but palpable love, and deep concern displayed for his daughters and Sarah, he resists the traditional image of the Irish patriarch as purely financial providers void of any emotional engagement in the family. Rather, Furlong exhibits a quiet, reflective form of masculinity that values care, decency and moral courage. Like Kinsella before, Furlong redefines the meaning of 'father' in Irish literature, from men whose only function is to earn a living to an invested figure who protects, nurtures and feels.

Tully de Lope describes the role of the rural Irish father as "the Gaelic masculine and Catholic Irish man, who controls everything around him, from the time the harvest needs to be collected to what his children will do with their lives" (23). Ultimately, John Kinsella in *Foster* and Bill Furlong in *Small Things Like These* reimagine this Irish father, succeeding to broaden the scope of what fatherhood can actually mean in Irish literature

and culture as a role defined by an emotional commitment.

4. The figure of the mother in *Foster* and *Small Things Like These*: Edna Kinsella and Eileen Furlong.

In twentieth-century Ireland, female identity was defined almost exclusively by motherhood within legal and cultural discourses alike. The role of women within society was determined by traditional expectations of motherhood, with this image of women as mothers "clearly uppermost" (Bacik 101) for lawmakers. Inside this mindset, the Irish mother was seen as either self-sacrificing or demanding, representing a duality that left little space for alternative models of motherhood or female roles (101-2). Additionally, the idealization of motherhood often became merged with Catholic belief, which emphasized this dichotomy and reinforced the importance of motherhood: "exalting Mary meant separating sexuality, which was harmful, from motherhood, which was good" (Delanty 219). However, by the 1980s when Keegan's novellas take place, global feminist movements had started leading to "new and exciting developments […] with the deconstruction of the very idea of 'woman' as a single entity" (Bacik 104), and the new image of the mother becoming "the accepted and encouraged model" (Segalen 235).

The two mother figures in *Foster* and *Small Things Like These* respond to models of change during the late twentieth century, with Edna Kinsella representing a female identity that is nurturing, yet autonomous, and Eileen Furlong remaining closer to conventional archetypes and in opposition to them. Through this contrast, Keegan brings attention to cultural tensions between deeply-ingrained ideals of motherhood as per patriarchal values and the increasing shift towards a more diverse mother identity.

4.1.Edna Kinsella in *Foster.*

In the first place, there is *Foster*'s Edna Kinsella, the girl's foster mother. Like her husband John, Edna becomes vital for the girl's emotional growth and development during the summer she spends with them. Also like him, though more visibly so, she is

deeply affected by the loss of their young son, who drowned in the farm's slurry pit. This is a grief that Edna channels into care and attentiveness for the girl, who mostly refers to her as "the woman". The girl's first impression of Edna is as someone who is independent and self-possessed regarding men: "when the woman comes out, she pays no heed to the men" (*Foster* 7). This observation early on the novella sets the tone for Edna's characterization as complex, independent and quiet.

From the moment they first meet, Edna displays a very physically affectionate demeanor towards the child, who seems to be unaccustomed to physical comfort. This is exemplified on one of their first interactions, when Edna bathes the girl with a gentleness unfamiliar to her: "her hands are like my mother's hands but there is something else in them too, something I have never felt before and have no name for" (18). This moment begins a pattern of tender physical care of the child that continues through the novella, from cleaning the wax from the girl's ears (35) to nursing her when she falls ill: "I didn't feel hot, but she kept me upstairs, bringing me hot drinks with lemon and cloves and honey, aspirin", 77). These acts of care beyond duty are instinctively maternal and loving, reassuring the child and helping her feel at home.

Furthermore, Edna's protectiveness cements her role as foster mother. This protectiveness surfaces even when the child is asleep, as she comments she would not treat her like her parents have: "'God help you, Child,' she says. 'If you were mine, I'd never leave you in a house with strangers'" (27). This protective instinct is recurring throughout the narrative, with Edna refusing to leave the child alone when the Kinsellas attend a local funeral (53) and frequently checking in on her state to ensure her comfort. These actions, together with the physical care of the child, are aligned with traditional motherly behaviors, as Edna's affection remains constant.

Beyond the physical care and protection of the child, Edna engages in efforts to

parent her and in emotional guidance proper of parenting, and particularly to mothers in Delanty's words: "mothers […] transmitted morals through instruction" (367). Edna corrects the girl's language and manners ('What do you say?' the woman says. 'Thanks,' I say. 'Thank you.'" 44) and seeks to teach her values that are lacking in her upbringing. For example, she insists to the girl her house has no secrets: "'Where there's a secret,' she says, 'there's shame, and shame is something we can do without'" (21). Edna's focus on honesty reveals she recognizes the parenting shortcomings of the girl's birth home, as well as her desire to foster a healthier environment where the girl can thrive emotionally, even for a short period of time. A particularly poignant example of this comes when during her first night at the Kinsella house, she wets the bed. Rather than shame her for the incident, Edna hides it, claiming the old mattress has wept (28) and encouraging the girl's self-esteem by giving her biscuits to improve her 'complexion'. This gesture is representative of Edna's belief that all the girl needs is "minding" (36); this phrasing contains her nurturing philosophy. Her care is maternal, befitting of traditional models, however, it is also free of the strictness or demanding nature that can be associated with Irish motherhood.

It is significant to note, for the sake of this analysis, that Edna displays more visible grief than her husband in regards to the child they lost. However, Edna does not repress or hide her sorrow: "she has been crying but she isn't ashamed" (43). This emotional openness suggests a strength found in vulnerability that the girl comes to perceive. Eventually, when the summer ends and the Kinsellas lose their foster child as well, Edna's sorrow is doubled, which the girl notices: "sobbing and crying, as though she is crying not for one now, but for two" (88). This indicates that not only has Edna come to see the girl as her own, but also that the girl is aware of this, as well as of the pain of being forced to lose her too.

Lastly, though less explicit than her husband John about her affection for the girl, Edna's love is nevertheless there. Instead of the direct displays of fondness favored by her husband, it is mostly conveyed through her interactions with others. She insists to those she meets that the girl gives no trouble, and that "'it's only missing her I'll be when she is gone'" (47), and does not correct a shopping assistant when she mistakes them for mother and daughter: "'Isn't she tall?' says the assistant. 'We're all tall,' says the woman" (45). Even if unspoken, these acknowledgements suggest an emotional bond between the girl and her foster mother. Later in the story, when she offers to knit for the girl ("she shows me pages with knitted jumpers and asks me which pattern I like best", 71), Edna's gesture includes her into the family. In contrast to her husband, Edna has a reticence to express her feelings outright, bringing complexity to her character: "I feel, now, that the woman is making up her mind as to whether or not she should say something but I don't really know what it is, and she gives me no clue" (79). In this way, Edna departs from the stereotypical image of self-sacrificing motherhood described by Bacik.

In conclusion, Edna Kinsella subverts and expands archetypes of the Irish mother. With gentle physical care, an effort in emotional guidance, and unspoken affection, she becomes an influential mother figure for the girl who fills the void in her life.

4.2.Eileen Furlong in *Small Things Like These*.

Eileen Furlong, Bill's wife in *Small Things Like* These, is a figure of traditional domesticity that contrasts with her unsettling social complicity, reflecting tensions between the personal and social. For the most part, Eileen is portrayed as a stay-at-home mother, an organizer of the home who directs her husband and daughters, for example, during holiday preparations (*Small Things* 17). Her role within the home is established in this way: she acts as a manager inside the family routine and creates an atmosphere of stability for her daughters. Eileen's practical command of the household, demonstrated

as she directs these domestic activities, illustrates her commitment to the family and the domestic actions in which this is shown align with traditional depictions of the hard-working mother.

Furthermore, Eileen's pride in the achievements of her daughters reveals more about her values and perception as a mother. She takes satisfaction in their polite behavior during Christmas: "'Isn't it nice to see them showing a bit of manners and not asking for the sun and stars?' Eileen said, after a while. 'We must be doing something right.'" (22). Eileen's pride is linked to both the girls' good behavior and to her self-assessment as a successful mother. This pride aligns her with traditional expectations of the demanding mother, and highlights her commitment to the lives of her daughters.

However, and in spite of her caring side, Eileen's character is an example of complexity that extends beyond archetypal, black-or-white mother figures. Bill describes her as having a "practical, agile mind" (12) that at times even unsettles him. He expresses there have been moments during their marriage when he "almost feared Eileen" and envied "her mettle, her red-hot instincts" (19). Eileen's sharpness and her ability to approach situations in a pragmatic way makes her a more forceful presence than expected, far from only a gentle and devoted housewife. Her harshness at times contrasts with Bill's gentler approach: when they discuss a neighbor whose alcoholism is causing trouble for his family, Eileen expresses a rather blunt stance: "if he'd any regard for his children, he'd not be going around like that. He'd pull himself out of it" (13). The contrast between her straightforwardness and Bill's sympathetic view points towards a character that, contrary to the self-sacrificing, suffering mother, is analytical and cold.

Eileen's pragmatism becomes more troubling for Bill when she, on a display of social complicity, disengages from those situations that do not affect her family. As Bill tries to confront the injustice occurring at the laundry in the convent, Eileen reacts with

coldness: “when he told her, she sat up rigid and said such things had nothing to do with them, and that there was nothing they could do” (29). Through this exchange, Eileen distances herself from the sympathetic stance displayed by Bill, in which she remains even as he presses her: “‘But what if it was one of ours?’ Eileen responds, ‘Tis not one of ours’” (30). In this conversation, Eileen breaks from the traditional maternal role of protection and empathy with not just practicality, also detachment. In this moment, Eileen is not the nurturing mother, she is the embodiment of a mindset that prioritizes personal boundaries and social distance.

With all this in mind, Eileen is a complex figure in *Small Things Like These*. Though she does initially adhere to conventional expectations of dutiful wife and mother, her actions, when examined, reveal a more complex character. She toes the line between caring, practical matriarch and a woman who, influenced by the environment she is surrounded by, becomes complicit in the social structures that perpetuate suffering. Eileen’s response to others’ hardship demonstrates a certain degree of moral ambiguity that reveals she simultaneously conforms to and defies the expectations set upon her as mother and woman. With this tension, Eileen’s character becomes a symbol of how broader social pressure can shape and limit the actions of women, even those that are at first glance immersed in the roles of mother and wife.

Edna Kinsella and Eileen Furlong’s motherhood is multidimensional, influenced by their experiences as well as the patriarchal society that they inhabit, whose forces are imposed into the lives of women and mothers in particular (Delanty 341). Edna’s understated affection and her care allow her to serve as a nurturing, if unconventional mother role to the young girl in her care. Her motherhood is based on healing and offering the girl a temporary, yet vital experience of being ‘minded’, even though she is not vocal or expressive about this love. On the other hand, Eileen’s version of a mother is more

conflicted, bound to service to her family yet complicit in social injustice. While both women function, to an extent, within traditional maternal roles, their responses to the events around them differ significantly and set them apart from traditional, one-dimensional portrayals of motherhood. This in accordance with the social and cultural forces of transformation towards more complex mother figures that surround them, as such forces mark mother-child relationships deeply (189). Where Irish mothers have mostly been depicted within the "virgin/mother" stereotype (Bacik 103), Edna and Eileen challenge this convention by being layered and, most importantly, themselves.

5. Representations of children in *Foster* and *Small Things Like These*: the girl and the Furlong daughters.

Narratives of Irish children have long carried the weight of a society where their suffering was normalized and their experiences silenced. Throughout much of the twentieth century, domestic violence against children was largely accepted as part of the social and institutional order in Ireland: as observed by Earner-Byrne, Irish society presented a "general social acceptance of a certain level of violence in hierarchical relationships until at least the 1980s" (664), which impacted generations upon generations of childhoods across Ireland. Children suffered even in those spaces reserved for their care and education, from the school system to orphanages and mother and baby homes (Fogarty 15). With this historical reality as backdrop, *Foster* and *Small Things* represent an exploration of how this violence and neglect manifest in the lives of individual children who, during the ages represented, should be guided by their parents through determinant stages, like acquiring autonomy and forming their own identity (Segalen 189). These stories focus on moments that reveal the emotional aftermath of much larger social failures, and reflect an approach to child development as an individualizing process (Delanty 368). Moreover, Keegan's efforts are framed as part of a contemporary literary trend in Ireland, as Fogarty describes: "the troubling dyadic figure of the traumatized child and pathological adolescent has become a prominent motif in recent Irish fictions" (13). Through these two novellas, Keegan shines a light on the deep scars that are left on children by a culture whose institutions and social complicity often failed to protect them, and the effects of this on children's minds and development.

5.1.The girl in *Foster*.

In *Foster*, Keegan traces the young girl's transformation when removed from a neglectful environment and introduced temporarily into the loving care of the Kinsellas. The novella

constitutes a meditation on childhood as an emotional landscape, as well as the possibility of healing through affection. Because of its child narrator's evolving sense of self-identity, the story is also situated both within and in contrast to the traditional Irish *bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age story. With its depiction of the development of a child that moves from an environment of abuse to one of care, *Foster* critiques the normalized emotional neglect of children in Irish society and proposes the transformative power of caring parenting as alternative.

To begin with, the aforementioned contrasts between the narrator's home and the Kinsella household are central to her journey. Most of what the girl notices in the Kinsellas points towards things that are "missing or amiss in her own family home" (Mikowski 366), signifying that the girl's keen awareness of the small acts of kindness she is given, from meals to consistent attention, illustrates how alien such care is to her experience. This sensitivity speaks of the neglect she has suffered, as she adjusts to a new home and, at the same time, unlearns patterns of emotional caution she has grown used to in her birth home.

This caution is seen in the girl's internal monologue: "I keep waiting for something to happen, for the ease I feel to end - to wake in a wet bed, to make some blunder, some big gaffe, to break something - but each day follows on much like the one before" (*Foster* 37). The reader is, in passages such as this, exposed to the mindset of a child who is unable to trust a stability that has never been offered to her before, resulting in a state of constant anxiety. In this way, Keegan points towards the long-term psychological effects of a life lived in the dysfunctional environment that had become normalized in the Ireland of the time.

Proceeding forward, Keegan places *Foster* within the tradition of the Irish *bildungsroman*. Unlike conventional coming-of-age narratives in other literary traditions,

Irish *bildungsroman* places an emphasis on hardship: Mikowski points out that this kind of story does not usually "[tell] of a happy childhood, or [celebrate] the romantic innocence" (368). To an extent, *Foster* follows this tradition, as the girl's childhood is steeped in trauma and confusion. The narrator herself admits she is "in a spot where I can neither be what I always am nor turn into what I could be" (*Foster* 11), articulating the liminality that is central to the coming-of-age genre. The girl is trapped between two versions of herself: one determined by fear, the other beginning to understand what it feels like to be safe. This much is critical to her transformation as she starts to imagine that another version of herself might be possible.

Despite this initial compliance to conventions of the genre, where many Irish *bildungsroman* tales end with failure or resignation, *Foster* subverts this by offering the possibility of redemption and salvation, to an extent. Thanks to the Kinsellas, the girl comes to understand what love looks like and what it feels like to be seen. This realization is captured during a pivotal walk with John Kinsella to the beach, when she becomes assimilated into the Kinsella family:

> 'See, there's three lights now where there was only two before.' I look out across the sea. There, the two lights are blinking as before, but with another, steady light, shining there also. 'Can you see it?' he says. 'I can,' I say. 'It's there.' And that is when he puts his arms around me and gathers me into them as though I were his (*Foster* 67).

By the end of the novella, the emotional lessons imparted by John and Edna have become internalized, and the girl has grown: "I have learned enough, grown enough, to know that what happened is not something I need ever mention. It is my perfect opportunity to say nothing" (86). This elective silence does not respond to her repression anymore, but her maturity, reflecting a recognition that this experience is a private gift for her that she can carry forward. Apart from change, the Kinsellas' model of love has given her power and confidence in contrast to what she has known and, although her separation from the

Kinsellas in the last pages seems final, the novella ends on a hopeful note that the girl can use the lessons learned during her summer with them to support herself through the rest of her life.

Because of this, the girl's trajectory through *Foster* defies prevailing notions of childhood in Irish literature. Where Fogarty claims childhood to be "a state from which there is no rescue or point of egress" (25), reflecting the historical weight of institutional and familial neglect in Ireland, *Foster* refutes this. Though it does not soften the damage that systemic failure causes in children's upbringing, it proposes that long-term healing is possible for one child. Challenging the fatalism associated with the Irish *bildungsroman*, Keegan suggests an experience of love, however brief, can chart new paths forward.

In summary, the representation of childhood in *Foster* acts as an elegy for what has been lost, as well as a celebration of what might still be saved. Through a careful construction of the emotional depth and transformations of her child protagonist, Keegan depicts the determining impact that attention, affection and safety can have on a child's life. The novella is deeply Irish in its themes and background of familial silence and standardized violence; still, it offers something rare to the genre: the possibility of escape through the power of being cared for.

5.2.Sarah and the Furlong daughters in *Small Things Like These*.

Small Things Like These departs from *Foster*, to begin with, in terms of narrative perspective. Where *Foster* was narrated by a child protagonist, *Small Things* centers on an adult father, Furlong, whose moral journey is determined by the children in his life. Children and, in particular, girls occupy the narrative foreground and are essential to the fabric of the novel: through the depiction of the five Furlong daughters as well as Sarah, Keegan uses children as catalysts for the hero's emotional awakening and as a tool for

narrative redemption. The novella affirms what Smidt, as quoted by Fogarty, describes: "the child should be envisaged as capable of creating movement and producing change in the various systems in which he or she is involved, including the school and the home" (Fogarty 17). The Furlong daughters and Sarah's presence and circumstances motivate the protagonist into transformative action, becoming symbols and agents of morality.

Firstly, Furlong's daughters are not background or filler characters, but central to his values and decisions. Most often, he refers to them collectively and with affection, noting they are "like young witches sometimes [. . .] with their black hair and sharp eyes" (*Small Things* 19). Through his descriptions, Furlong blurs the lines between individuality and collectivity: Within the domestic environment, the girls appear with their mother as they help her in the kitchen, working alongside her like a well-greased machine (44-45); this indicates the girls belong to a household defined by cooperation and stability. Eileen and the Furlong girls form a coherent system that embodies familial harmony, contrasting sharply to the suffering Sarah is subjected to in the laundry.

Furthermore, Furlong's observations of his daughters' achievements from academic to artistic (12-13) are a testament to the outcome of their upbringing in an environment in which, contrary to the established patterns of violence and neglect against children, they have enjoyed the opportunity to grow. As an example, the eldest daughter Kathleen helps Furlong do the bookkeeping at his business in exchange for pocket money (31), signifying her father entrusts her with adult responsibilities. The second eldest daughter, Joan, sings in the local choir and offers her family a moment of transcendence: "[Furlong] had turned sentimental because of all the coloured lights and the music, and the sight of Joan singing with the choir, how she looked like she belonged there" (20). Seeing his daughter's belonging resonates with Furlong as opposed to his ostracized childhood and emphasizes how well-adapted the Furlong girls are inside the community.

In contrast, the Furlongs' youngest daughter Loretta represents the emotional capacity of children. When she becomes upset by the sight of Santa Claus during Christmas celebrations, Furlong reflects on her emotional reaction: "it cut him, all the same, to see one of his own so upset by the sight of what other children craved" (17). This emphasis on the child's emotional reaction points towards a deeper truth expressed by *Small Things*: children, with their innocence and vulnerability, represent a moral compass that adults cannot ignore, a revelation that challenges conventions of familial neglect.

Moreover, the concept of children as a moral compass is further symbolized by Sarah, the young girl Furlong rescues from the convent laundry. When she is introduced into the narrative, Furlong's inner world entirely changes, as she reveals to him the reality of forced labor and abuse within the convent he had so far not been aware of. Very notably, the girl shares a name with Furlong's late mother: "'Sarah,' he said. 'That was my own mother's name'" (42). This naming is not incidental: Sarah's suffering is connected with the memory of Furlong's mother, who could have suffered the same fate had her employer not taken pity on her. This connection turns Sarah's struggle into personal for Furlong, making his confrontation with the convent more urgent and emotionally significant.

To witness the nuns dehumanize Sarah awakens Furlong morally: "what most tormented him was not so much how she'd been left in the coal shed or the stance of the Mother Superior; the worst was how the girl had been handled while he was present and how he'd allowed that" (49). This moment constitutes a realization of complicity for Furlong as a participant in a society that enabled such abuse through silence, connecting with the neglect Irish children suffered during the twentieth century. The silence is so pervading it is even literal; when Furlong is taking Sarah to his home, "not one person they met addressed Sarah or asked where he was taking her" (58).

However, Sarah is also a figure of redemption, as her rescue awakens in Furlong the sense of purpose he had been seeking throughout the novella. As he walks at her side on their way to his house, he feels himself redeemed: "how light and tall he almost felt walking along with this girl at his side and some fresh, new, unrecognisable joy in his heart. Was it possible that the best bit of him was shining forth, and surfacing?" (58). Beyond Furlong's personal clarity, this passage has him reclaim his agency and sense of compassion as part of a society that has normalized cruelty. Sarah allows Furlong to, at least metaphorically, rescue his own mother and rewrite the story that could have been hers.

Children, in Irish stories, are victims as much as they are redeemers (Fogarty 18). The duality of this representation is central to *Small Things Like These*, where the Furlong daughters represent the possibilities of a world where children are seen and taken care of, and Sarah what can happen when they are ignored. Nevertheless, both signify for Furlong a path to moral clarity. It is through this connection to these children, his own and the rescued girl, that he takes decisive action to enact change. As he does this, Keegan effectively brings attention to the power children have, perhaps not through direct influence, but through their embodiment of vulnerability and moral truth that adults must choose to either honor or ignore.

In summary, both *Foster* and *Small Things* deal with the legacy of a society that had long enabled the neglect and the suffering of children, its most vulnerable members. Keegan uses portrayals of young girls who either endure this abuse or manage to escape it to respond to the normalized silence that characterized Ireland's treatment of children well into the twentieth century, as well as to what Mead, quoted by Segalen, would call a 'post-figurative' culture where "children are chiefly taught by their parents and which is authorized by the past" (173); therefore, where parents are responsible. Her narratives,

beyond individual trauma, reflect the broader cultural and institutional patterns of the time; yet, instead of reproducing the hopelessness often defining such representations, the novellas propose that healing and transformation, although rare and bittersweet, are possible. Thus, the figure of the child is reclaimed as more than a symbol of loss: they are a source of potential and a reminder that the consequences of past silence demand moral initiative by adults in the present.

Conclusion.

In *Foster* and *Small Things Like These*, Claire Keegan depicts the powerful impact in literature of the legacies of patriarchal values, neglect and social complicity that shaped Ireland's history through the twentieth century. While centering the narratives on two ordinary families that live in rural areas, Keegan brings attention to those individuals that have been historically marginalized, from women to children, in national discourse and literary tradition alike. In doing so, she confronts her audience with the impact of a society upon the families that live in it, and portrays how moral redemption can be found within a domestic setting.

Both novellas have at their heart a significant concern with the family structures that define individual lives. In *Foster*, a young girl's summer away from a neglectful home into a space of consistent affection functions as a critique of how children's emotional needs have been, historically, ignored within the Irish family unit. The protagonist's personality is marked by silence, internalized shame, and an old-beyond-her-years awareness of self, all traits that reflect a society in which children were seen but rarely given attention. The capacity of the Kinsellas to love and care for her, from John's advice to Edna's consistency, offers the girl an alternative model of belonging and teaches her self-worth unlike anything she has ever known. With this, Keegan challenges dominant narratives of Irish fathers as patriarchal providers exempt from emotional responsibility and Irish mothers as self-sacrificial or demanding; instead, she depicts family love as something transformative; not because it is perfect, but for its consistency and awareness of the child's needs.

In a similar vein, *Small Things Like These* questions the family roles of father and mother within the context of social complicity. Eileen Furlong is a figure both caring and troubling, as her maternal instincts are contrasted with self-preservation. Her lack of

interest in Sarah, victim to the convent laundry system, is a reminder of the deeply entrenched institutional cruelty in 1980s Irish life, whereas Bill's gradual awakening to the injustice, motivated by his love of his daughters as well as his own childhood, positions the father as capable of emotional vulnerability. When he chooses to rescue Sarah, Furlong breaks a generational cycle of silence, representing an act of personal courage and at the same time a gesture of resistance against institutions and ideologies that long dominated Irish family life.

As for the children in the novellas, they are more than passive victims of neglect or abuse; instead, they are vital agents of change. The girl in *Foster* and her growth represents a challenge to long-standing literary representations of Irish childhood as defined solely by trauma, as Keegan reimagines, realistically yet optimistically, the Irish bildungsroman, suggesting even brief encounters with love and attention can have a redemptive power that lasts. Though the girl's inevitable return to her birth family is bittersweet, she carries to it the knowledge that another life is possible, the realization of which grants her agency and, potentially, a better future.

The children of *Small Things Like These*, Furlong's daughters and Sarah, represent contrasting possibilities: children who are protected or forgotten. On the one hand, Furlong's daughters are thriving within their secure, loving households; on the other hand, Sarah symbolizes the consequences of systemic neglect and unchecked authority by the Church. All six of them function as mirrors for Furlong's conscience, and it is his connection to them that motivates him into action through the ethical demands of adulthood. Children, as represented by Keegan, are recipients of adult decisions as well as essential to how those decisions are understood and made.

Both texts emphasize the importance of daily moral choices that, collectively, shape lives and define society. Keegan's characters may not be revolutionaries, but they are

ordinary people faced with ethical dilemmas of their time. Their domestic spaces and families become sites of resistance, in which silence can be broken, empathy can be rediscovered, and care can be extended beyond obligation. The emphasis placed on human connection contrasts with the broader historical context engaged with in the novellas, a culture where the institutional abuse of women and children was accepted, women were confined to reductive roles, and fathers were often emotionally absent.

By engaging with the historical evolution of the Irish family as a social institution, this dissertation has drawn on historical sociology to place Keegan's narratives into their context. An analysis of the characters' roles, from parents to children, has evidenced how the weight of Irish history and society shapes the families present in *Foster* and *Small Things*. The intersections of generational roles and institutional influence are a background for how Keegan's novellas reflect, resist, and reimagine traditional family dynamics in Ireland. This essay has demonstrated, through its attention to these dynamics from sociological and literary lenses, how the characters present in the novellas do not serve only as individuals, but as commentaries on collective memory, social complicity, and the possibility of change.

Keegan's two works seek to confront and revise national myths of familial harmony. When she writes about the people in the margins of these myths, from voiceless children to kind fathers and complex mothers, Keegan is contributing to a literature of reparation of the past. *Foster* and *Small Things* do not aim to resolve the traumas they depict, and in fact do not; instead, they give them space and a voice. In the process, Keegan reclaims silence as a tool of emotional depth and moral clarity, rather than oppression. Where she could be dramatizing abuse, Keegan insists on emotional complexity, celebrates their experiences, and offers nuanced portrayals of characters who are navigating love, grief, and conscience under the pressure of their time.

All in all, *Foster* and *Small Things Like These* are illustrations of how deeply personal acts, be of care, protection, or the refusal thereof, can disrupt long-established cycles of harm and thus redefine what it means to be family, moral, human. As the unheard lives of Ireland's past are given voice, Keegan honors the truth of that silence at the same time she breaks it. Her work acts as a reminder that, though the structures that harmed generations upon generations in Ireland had deep roots, resistance could begin from the institution of the family in the smallest gestures: a hand held, a bed made, a child seen. Though the novellas do not propose easy solutions, they do offer something more valuable: the belief that love and moral action, even when imperfect, matter, and from them change can begin.

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