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Coming Out, Queer Sex, and Heteronormativity in two Irish-language Novels

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Abstract:

It has been nearly 30 years since Teresa de Lauretis coined the term "Queer Theory" in a special edition of *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* (1991). Since then, Queer Theory has evolved and changed, becoming an interdisciplinary in-vogue "methodology" that questions the subversive and the different.The social, cultural, and literary landscape of Ireland has also changed in those 30 years, a country that was once seen as a place where "homosexuality has occupied an uncomfortable place" (Conrad 2001, 124). This paper will discuss the literary texts of two Irish-language writers, Micheál Ó Conghaile and Pádraig Standún, who both reflect these shifts in attitudes in contemporary modern Ireland. Both writers unpack public and private expressions of identity, sex, and heteronormativity in their work. Bringing bold new themes to a language that was once perceived to be linked to nationalism and the Catholic Church, both Ó Conghaile and Standún engage with queer themes in their literary works, which have largely gone unnoticed by English language critics. This paper will seek to flesh out how these Irish-language writers spoke to, and for, a community within a community and for a minority within a minority. Discussing both *Sna Fir* (1999; *Amongst Men*)[1] and *Cion Mná* (1993; *A Woman's Love*), I will explore how queer identity has intersected with Irish-language literature and will question how these texts interact with broader cultural phenomena such as coming out, queer sex, and heteronormativity.

Keywords: Gaeilge, Gender and Literature, Irish Queer Fiction, Micheál Ó Conghaile, Pádraig Standún

1. Introduction: Queerying and Queering Irish-Language Identity and Literature

Éibhear Walshe (1997) posits that literary production, including the novel, became a tool to assert national difference between Ireland and England throughout the revival period (late nineteenth to early twentieth century). A coherent masculine identity was at the heart of the revival's aims which Walshe terms as "masculinist nationalism". Masculinist nationalism, informed

[1] Unless otherwise stated, all translations into English are mine.

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by a variety of images and mythology of identities (Nic Dhiarmada 1998), was at the heart of the revival period. In the past number of decades, however, Irish-language writers have begun to disrupt this narrative and are now speaking to transgressive, and oftentimes challenging, themes such as the coming out narrative, queer sex, and non-normative sexual behaviour and identities. Micheál Ó Conghaile and Pádraig Standún, two Irish-language writers, both engage with and chart queer identities and love in two important texts: *Sna Fir* (Ó Conghaile 1999) and *Cion Mná* (Standún 1993). While *Sna Fir* deals with a queer man in his twenties navigating his sexual desires in urban spaces, *Cion Mná* deals with two queer women's blossoming relationship in rural spaces. Before looking at both texts, I will provide a contextual survey of how the voice and tone of Irish-language literature changed from a masculinist one during the revival to a more diverse and complex one in contemporary literary works in the Irish-language.

Literature in Irish was not always so anxious to maintain what I would see as a masculinist normative identity. Interestingly, the bardic poetry of the sixteenth century was layered with homoerotic themes and imagery (McKibben 2010). The Early Modern period of Irish (1200-1650), saw the emergence of eloquent, professional poetry as a form of early modern public relations. The land of Ireland represented through poetic imagery, was an ongoing motif in this period. Lacey (2008) points out that male bards were oftentimes seen as symbolically married to their chieftains. Poetry, as mentioned by McKibben, would serve as a tool to counteract "in potent terms of emasculation, penetration and dissolution" (2010, 7). This was on the back of the Act for the English Order, Habit and Language (1537) that sought to create an English colony of Ireland. Bards were obliged to maintain the link to the Irish political elite through praising their chieftains as their primary function. This relationship included praise of "the patron's undeniable sexual potency […] an additional proxy for leadership confirming the poet's own homoeroticism as merely conventional in an institutionalized structure" (McKibben 2010, 174). Although very much a poetic conceit, the poetry of this era was markedly homoerotic and conveyed an anxiety about English colonialization.

The Irish cultural revival (beginning in 1884) was noted by Máirín Nic Eoin as one of the most important intellectual movements in Ireland (1982, 25). What the revival sought to deliver and promote was the idealisation of Irish identity through a cultural tradition in order to set itself against British cultural identities (Woods 1998, 42). This was achieved through the promotion of the Irish language, the arts, sport, and political movements. The trajectory of the liberalisation and contemporising of Irish-language literature can be traced back to the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In "Queer Treasons: Homosexuality and Irish Identity", Kathryn Conrad (2001) explores the manner in which non-normative historical figures were handled in Irish history. Looking at Oscar Wilde, Roger Casement, Eva Gore-Booth, and Kate O'Brien, Conrad dissects the social and political history of Ireland under the spectrum of non-normative identity and the manner in which they were treated with disdain by a Catholic Nationalist Ireland. Until recently, queer history was often ignored in various social historical accounts of Ireland (Lacey 2008, 6). The development of queer sexuality and social movements in Irish history is a complex one; from a supressed homosexual subpopulation to the emergence of a significant trans rights movement. Non-normative sexuality, and any transgressors, were treated with a disdain which stemmed largely from various inherited colonial laws or from Catholic dogma (Ferriter 2009, 6).

The 1937 Irish Constitution saw the family unit being immediately positioned as an important institution and was enshrined as a legally protected entity which would create a coherency of normative lives and solidify gender roles for the new Irish Republic (Conrad 2001). From the foundation of the state, nationalism and conservative political and religious

beliefs went hand in hand. Any outward threat to the family unit was marked with anxiety and resistance. Homosexuality was seen as a foreign import, or as something which came "from foreign hands" (Lacey, 2008). Homosexuality was not seen as a native or normal state of being or identity. Ireland, as a nation, strived to build a puritanical society, in order to remain safe from homosexuality. Homosexuality was categorised neatly as either a crime, a disease, or as a sin (Aldrich, Wotherspoon 2001[2000], 9). However, a more pluralist, inclusive society emerged from this era, which saw Irish attitudes and policies change having been influenced by international events and contexts (see Rose 1994 [1993], 10). The Stonewall Riots of 1969 in New York inspired the establishment of gay and lesbian organisations and movements in Ireland, which in turn championed the creation of a more socially inclusive, pluralist Irish society through the decriminalisation of sexual activity between males in 1993 (Bowyer 2010, 57), and the successful marriage equality referendum in 2015.

Through centuries of the British colonisation of Ireland, the Irish-language has indeed recognised homosexuality and queer identities as real phenomenon. De Brún (2017), discussing an essay by Nicholas Williams published in the 1970s, explains that homosexuality was rarely mentioned in the literature of the language. However, in Daithí Ó Luineacháin's (1997) dictionary of sexuality, the writer lists several native words for non-normative sexual identities, including *cigire tónach* (bottom inspector), *buachaill baitín* (batty boy), and *Muireann i mbríste* (a woman called Muireann in trousers). While the terms appear to be derogatory, they prove that non-normative sexuality was indeed an acknowledged and known phenomenon. Attempts at linking the Irish-language with a queer urban community was seen in the early nineties with the establishment of GAA (Gaeilgeoirí Aontaithe Aeracha / United Gay Irish Speakers). Woods (1998), in her anthropological and sociolinguistic study of the group, saw its establishment as an attempt to overthrow the cultural and ideological hangover of nineteenth century conservatism in relation to homosexuality. Interestingly, Ohno (2002) describes how the marrying of queer and Irish-language cultures is a natural one; both communities are minorities in the country, and both have fought, or are fighting, for community rights. This contrasts with the views of literary and social commentators such as Ciarán Ó Coigligh (1993, 24), who suggested that homosexuality as a phenomenon only included 1% of the population and therefore was "undeserving" of such critical and social attention. However, more recently we see the establishment of the group Aerach.Aiteach.Gaelach. This group, founded by poet Ciara Ní É, aims to develop interdisciplinary works that will celebrate Irish language LGBT+ speakers across Ireland.

Much like the social movements detailed above, Irish-language literature has gone on a "transformative journey" (Ó Siadhail 2010, 145), running parallel with major societal developments in the Republic of Ireland. Ní Chléirchín (2004) notes how Irish-language poets became outward-looking due to the INNTI movement. INNTI was a literary magazine founded by a group of young poets in University College Cork, who began dissecting themes and issues during the "Year that Rocked the World" (1968) according to Ó Dúshláine (2011, 7). Irish-language literature has counted queer writers such as Micheál Ó Conghaile and Cathal Ó Searcaigh in its contemporary canon, while others such as Pádraig Standún, Pádraig Ó Cíobháin, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, spoken-word poet Ciara Ní É, Alex Hijmans, and Proinsias Mac a' Bhaird have represented queer love in their literary works through the medium of Irish. This new dawn in Irish-language literature contrasts greatly with the literature of the twentieth-century revival, which centred on traditional novels based on perceived normative relationships. Therefore, this paper will look at two prominent queer novels, both from the 1990s, that seek to reflect queer Irish-language lives.

2. Micheál Ó Conghaile: Queer Eye for the Irish (Language) Guy

Faighimid pictiúr gléineach de bheatha inmheánach, de shaol síceach más maith leat, Ghaeltacht Chonamara faoi mar atá sí i láthair na huaire. Ríomhann sé a n-intíreachas dúinn le súile tiorma. Fadhbanna a chuid caracthar, ní fadhbanna bochtaineachta ná easpa airgid iad (cé nach maifí nach bhfuil a leithéid ann), ach fadhbanna pearsanta síoraí an duine – amhras agus botúnacht agus féinaithne agus féinmheas [...]. (Titley 1987, 42)

We get a depiction of internal life, of the psychic life, if you will, of the Conamara Gaeltacht as it is today. He discusses the parochial with clear intent. With regards to his characters' problems, they are not ones of poverty or a lack of money (though they are indeed there), but the personal problems of the person – the doubt and the awkwardness of self-awareness and self-respect [...].

Micheál Ó Conghaile, one of the Irish-language's most well-known and prolific contemporary writers, was born on the now abandoned Gaeltacht (Irish-Speaking) island of InisTreabhair in County Galway in 1962. Now recognised for his experimental expressions of queer experience in his literary works, Ó Conghaile displayed an interest in writing and literature from a young age (Ó Siadhail 2005, 55). Literature provided Ó Conghaile with a much-needed release from island life that allowed him to explore and feed his imagination (Mac Con Iomaire 2000, 31) As Ó Conghaile began to write, he made the decision to write through the medium of Irish. As a native speaker of Irish, Ó Conghaile felt that this would be a natural direction for his work. Ó Conghaile later founded *Cló Iar-Chonnachtin* in 1985. This is now Ireland's largest private Irish-language publishing house (Ó Siadhail 2010, 147). Ó Conghaile wanted to support the development of Irish-language literature and to offer a platform for less well-known writers who were writing through the medium of the language (Bord na Gaeilge 1990, 4). As both publisher and writer, Ó Conghaile saw the development of contemporary Irish-language literature which dealt with new and exciting thematic explorations, that challenged conservative assumptions others made about the language (Ó Conghaile 2003, 229).

Ó Conghaile's publishing company gave both academic scholars and creative writers the opportunity to publish their works for both international and national audiences. His own creative and academic work sees the development of his craft and his coming of age as a writer. His first collection of short stories, *Mac an tSagairt* (*The Priest's Son*), published in 1986, dealt with a variety of societal issues, including suicide, abortion, and separation. The short story as a literary genre was envisaged by Pádraig Mac Piarais to be the most appropriate form of creative expression for the Irish-language[,] as it mirrored traditional storytelling (Ní Dhonnchadha 1981, 51). *Mac an tSagairt* was celebrated for its rich handling of themes and its self-confident and realised style (Ní Dhonnchadha 1987, 28). Ó Conghaile then went on to publish a collection of traditional Irish songs in his 1986 *Croch Suas É!* (*Sing up!*), as well as a collection of poetry in *Comhrá Caillí* (*The Hag's Conversation*) in 1987, a medium that the writer has since abandoned. His undergraduate training in history gave him the skill set to undertake a study of the social history and cultural links between Conamara and the Aran islands in 1988. His short story collection *An Fear a Phléasc* (*The Man that Exploded*) gained a great deal of critical attention. Breathnach and Ní Neachtain (2010, 65) note that the seeds of this text were well and truly planted in *Mac an tSagairt* and that these seeds come to fruition in this effort. Throughout this collection, the writer creates in some of his stories a queer and often surreal world where he unearths gay cruising, gay rape, and the coming out narrative. Here we encounter a brave new voice in Irish-language literature. Ó Conghaile then went on to what could be assumed to be a companion collection in 2003 with *An Fear nach nDéanann Gáire* (*The Man that Doesn't*

Laugh), which similarly addresses themes ranging from anonymous gay sex to issues surrounding mental health. Other efforts include the 2001 novella *Seachrán Jeaic Sheáin Johnny* (*Jeaic Sheáin Johnny's Wanderings*), which deals with an elderly traditional singer falling in love with a young song collector. With that, Ó Conghaile then went on to write three plays *Cúigear Chonamara* (*The Conamara Five* 2003), *Jude* (2007), and *Go dTaga do Ríocht* (*Thy Kingdom Come* 2009). His three plays deal with various themes including cross-dressing, coming out, and parental control. More recently, Ó Conghaile has refocused his attention on the short story with the publication of *Diabhlaíocht Dé* (*God's Devilment*) in 2015 and has returned to the novella in *Sa Teach seo Anocht* (2019; *In this House Tonight*).

However, this paper seeks to consider how Ó Conghaile has disrupted the Irish literary canon through concentrating on queer themes and motifs in his writings. Máirín Nic Eoin has described Ó Conghaile's style as both distinctive and recognisable (2005, 363) as he engages with thematic content not regularly seen in the Irish-language literary canon until recent times. Ó Conghaile fleshes out some of his most noteworthy themes in his award-winning novel *Sna Fir*. Ó Siadhail (2010) has described the text as a queer *Bildungsroman* of Irish-language literature. This paper will focus primarily on *Sna Fir* and how Ó Conghaile disrupts the *status quo* in relation to sex and sexuality throughout the text.

3. Pádraig Standún: The Renegade Priest

> Scríbhneoir é an Standúnach nach leasc leis an rud atá ar intinn aige a rá go poiblí. Dearbhaíonn sé go bhfuil sé de dhualgas air é seo a dhéanamh fad is a bhíonn an t-inspreagadh beo ann. (Ó hEanacháin 1991, 6)

> Standún is a writer that doesn't regret saying what is on his mind publicly. He confirms that it his is responsibility as long as the motivation is still alive within him.

Pádraig Standún is both a novelist and Catholic priest who writes provocatively on contemporary issues, which include queer themes, in his work. Born in Castlebar, Co. Mayo in 1946, Standún has become one of the most prolific novelists in contemporary Irish-language writing. His play *Uisce ina Fhíona* (*Water into Wine*) was shortlisted by Ó Conghaile's Cló Iar-Chonnacht's literary awards, and an English language film based on his novel *Súil le Breith* (translated by the author as *Lovers* 1983) was produced as *Budawanny* (1987). Standún has spent time as a parish priest in various Gaeltachtaí over the years including in An Cheathrú Rua, in Inis Meáin, and in Inis Oírr. He took leave from his religious vocation in 1990, in order to focus on his writing. Standún has led what some might argue is a non-normative life, living with a woman and even helping with the rearing of his partner's children (Ó Muirí 1992, 28). He says "I had a life unlike many priests, in so far as I was a husband in every way but on paper and a father to a daughter who came into my life as a young girl […]" (*ibidem*), Therefore, it is clear that Standún is happy to push through the strict religious parameters laid down by the Catholic church and has been nicknamed *Sagart an Ghrá* (*Priest of Love*) (*ibidem*).

In the account of his years as a parish priest, discussed by Ó Muirí (*ibidem*), writing and his ministry are the most important things in Standún's life. The intellectual cradle of Standún's work has been said to be firmly rooted in St. Patrick's College, Maynooth where Standún trained as a priest (Ó Ceallaigh 1998, 340). His ability in discussing sensitive, and often controversial, themes could be seen as an attempt to destabilise the national narrative (Ó Conchubhair 2005). Standún's first novel, *Súil le Breith*, was described by Ó Siadhail as "the story of Fr. Tom

Connor and his pregnant lover and housekeeper, Marion Warde, against a backdrop of a rural community struggling to survive" (2010, 146). In *A.D. 2016* (1988) Standún again uses the voice of a priest who is on pilgrimage to Dublin during the centenary of the 1916 rising, seen in *Súil le Breith* (1983). *Cíocras* (*Eagerness* 1991) again used a priest as a main character and questioned the dogma of celibacy. *An tAinmhí* (*The Anvy* 1992), saw a shift in Standún's style to include the supernatural, depicted as a crude animal terrorising the local community. In 1993, *Na hAntraipeologicals* (*The Anthropologists*), looked at how Gaeltacht communities are subjected to outside academic study and how this affects the community. However, in the same year Standún published *Cion Mná* (*A Woman's Love*), which Ó Siadhail describes as a novel where "the lesbian relationship between the fictional Chief Executive of Údarás na Gaeltachta, the state's agency for Gaeltacht industrial and community development, and her housekeeper, while also exploring issues of local politics, spousal abuse and community rights" (2010, 147).

Since the publication of *Cion Mná,* Standún has written six other novels dealing with various themes relating to religion, sex and sexuality, and contemporary Irish life. However, no other novel in Standún's body of work deals so directly with queer love and the themes that surround it. Although there has been some critical attention for the book, particularly by Ó Siadhail (2010), a queer reading of the text has yet to be undertaken.

4. Coming Out: Compulsive Confession and Foucault

The coming out narrative is seen in both literature and society as an empowering but oftentimes dangerous disclosure. Davies (1992) in "The Role of Disclosure in Coming Out Among Gay Men", explains the importance of coming out by giving language to identity and desire. Coming out sees queer people moving "out" from the privacy of the closet. Foucault theorizes how sexuality and sexual acts are often compulsively confessed and are, in this way, "outted" (1978, 59). We confess our crimes, our sins, our thoughts, and our desires routinely through narrative-building in both life and art. Culturally, this form of confession, and compulsion to confess, is rooted largely in the relief of outing oneself. This particular desire, or compulsion, is "*ingrained in us*" (60; emphasis added). Confession has played a major role in the history of sexuality, and it is the sexual act and the "thoughts that recapitulated it, the obsessions that accompanied it, the images, desires, modulations, and quality of pleasure that animated it" (63) that reinforces shame of identity. This form of compulsive confession is seen in how queer people are policed by external forces (doctors, teachers, priests etc.). Both Micheál Ó Conghaile and Pádraig Standún, in *Sna Fir* and *Cion Mná* respectively, deal with the coming out narrative in starkly different ways.

Sna Fir follows the coming of age of John Paul Mac Donncha, a young man from the Conamara Gaeltacht. Ó Siadhail notes that Ó Conghaile's novel captures the "experiences of a range of situations, from casual nocturnal sexual encounters in the Phoenix Park […] to Dublin's gay bar and private club scene; the queer community in London; [and] his first long-term homosexual relationship" (2010, 149). John Paul's sexual and emotional encounters with the queer community in Dublin and London rehearses the ongoing coming out narrative in queer people's lives. Coming out is not shown as a singular event in Ó Conghaile's novel, but as an ongoing process. The protagonist not only comes out to each man he has a sexual encounter with, but also repeatedly to himself. Interestingly, in one such sexual encounter in Dublin's Phoenix Park, John Paul meets with Seán, a young man who relies on John Paul to guide him through his first experience of cruising. However, Seán's nervousness and anxiety over whether or not God is angry with them because of their behaviour is clear from the outset. John Paul and

Seán's encounter shows the need to identify and recognise humanity in the queer world. John Paul's befriending of Seán for guidance over the sexually-charged atmosphere of the public space shows how the coming out narrative is never a linear process, but always an ongoing outing of oneself, even in anonymous spaces like the public park.

Cion Mná handles the coming out differently, while representing queer women in stark terms for the first time in Irish-language literature. Interestingly, Standún's novel was published the same year as the decriminalization of male homosexuality in Ireland, reflecting the changing national discourse in relation to sexuality and identity in contemporary Ireland. The coming out narrative is displayed in the relationship between Therese, the CEO of Údarás na Gaeltachta, and her home-help, Bridie. Early on in the text, we begin to understand Therese as a hard-working and no-nonsense character, leading to her nickname *Thatch* (echoing Margaret Thatcher). Unlike John Paul and Seán in *Sna Fir,* Therese and Bridie's relationship is mainly rooted in private spaces, behind closed doors, and is not as sexually-charged. Bridie, upon leaving with her young son Caomhán an abusive relationship, finds refuge in Therese's employ in the Gaeltacht. Both characters slowly begin to develop a deep (at first) platonic relationship, which is initiated when a vulnerable Bridie explains to Therese what had happened to her in England. The theme of coming out slowly comes to a head throughout the text, as Bridie first refuses her identification as a queer woman, only eventually to feel empowered and embrace her attraction to Therese:

> Is maith liom thú. Tá tú go maith dom, do Chaomhán. Ach ní leispiach mise. Níl aon chlaonadh mar sin ionam. Is maith liom fir, cé go mbíonn an ghráin agam orthu mar gheall ar rudaí a tharla, má thuigeann tú mé [...] Is maith liomsa fir freisin. Níl a fhios agam céard is leispiach ann. Tá a fhios agam céard a chiallaíonn sé, ar ndóigh. Ach ní airím aon chlaonadh faoi leith i dtreo na mban seachas na fir. Ach is fearr liom thusa ná duine ar bith ar an saol. (Standún 1993, 128)

> I like you. You are good for me, for Caomhán. But I'm not a lesbian. I don't have that inclination in me. I like men, although I sometimes hate them for things that have happened, if you understand me [...] I like men as well. I don't know what a lesbian is. I know what it means, obviously. But I don't feel that inclination towards women instead of men. But I prefer you than anyone else in this world.

The confession of queer identities and desires in Ó Conghaile's and Standún's work is depicted throughout both texts. While sexual desires and non-normative secrets are something that the queer character has "written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away" (Foucault 1978, 43), it is through the coming out narrative that queer people find their voices. The characters coming out to themselves, or coming out to their communities, are important parts of the queer narrative depicted in both texts. The compulsion to come out and to confess consolidates and confirms queer identity in both novels. While the emotional response of the coming out narrative is handled differently in each text, it is clear that coming out is an important part of making sense of the queer experience. Queer sexual experience, however, experienced in both public and private settings, is explored in both novels. While the coming out narrative is inextricably linked to that of sexual acts, both authors deal with queer themes in bold new ways.

5. Inside Out: Sex in Public and Private Spaces

Ó Conghaile and Standún depict queer sex in both public and private spaces in both of these novels. While *Sna Fir* depicts various public and private sexual encounters that John Paul

has in Dublin and in London, *Cion Mná* depicts sex in terms of abuse, shaming, but eventual celebration. The contrasting depictions of sex shows how Irish-language literature has engaged with the spectrum of sexual experience. In *Backward Glances: Cruising the Queer Streets of New York and London,* Turner (2003) notes how queer communities have frequently been silenced. The narratives of queer communities, whether sexual or otherwise, are an important part of community-building. Warner and Berlant say that "sex is everywhere present" (1998, 546), and this social ubiquity is seen in the works of both writers dealt with in this essay. However, each novel depicts sexual encounters in different ways with diverse emotional backdrops in both *Sna Fir* and *Cion Mná*. These encounters offer representation(s) of queer people in Irish-language literature. Its place in its canon allow us to problematise and question ideas around sexuality, gender, and power more broadly in both Irish-language and general Irish studies.

In Ó Conghaile's *Sna Fir*, we see various representations of public sexual encounters (namely anonymous sex in cruising areas) throughout the text. Hammers, describes the aim of cruising as an act which has the "intent, mobility, possession of the gaze" (2008, 56). John Paul frequents public parks and cemeteries in search of sexual gratification. This leads to him being insulted and jeered by a group of teenagers outside the Phoenix Park's gates who say "*Another one of them. Queer as fuck* […] *Definitely, see the bent cut of him* […] *Going off now to get himself queered*" (Ó Conghaile 1999, 121). In the safety of the dark park, John Paul can find sexual relief with other men in public spaces. Ó Conghaile, however, goes on to include a reference to the gay sauna scene in Dublin when John Paul visits *Club 99*. We see that John Paul often struggles with his identity as a queer man from Conamara and this acts as an undercurrent in the character's motives. The anonymity of the city, however, affords him the opportunity to carve out queer experiences in these sexually-charged spaces which would be accessible in his Gaeltacht hometown. De Brún in "History Repeating Itself: Men, Masculinities, and 'His Story' in the Fiction of Micheál Ó Conghaile", notes that Ó Conghaile's overarching theme that he frequently returns to is of the forbidden (2017, 22). In *Club 99*, he wonders how anyone would know that he isn't from Dublin, that he wasn't born and raised in Dublin. Through befriending Jó, an older man he meets in the park, John Paul is able to find the sauna in order to have sex. Once there he uses a fake name in order to protect his identity, even in this anonymous place for sexual gratification. The sauna, however, brings the queer community together: "saibhir is an daibhir an bocht is an nocht" ("wealthy or poor, poor or naked") (Ó Conghaile 1999, 63). John Paul then embodies a sense of anonymity, that he is no longer from Ceathrú na gCloch, that by being naked and by using a false name and surname, that he is now part of the community, he is now part of a queer community:

> An ghal theasa bhrothallach […] a théann siar i mo bhéal le gach anáil fhliuch the. Braithim coirp gan aithint im ghaobhar amhaill is dá mbeinn i marbhlann. Tosaíonn siad ansin ag snámh timpeall orm mar a bheadh ag eitilt thart go héadrom ciúin taibhsiúil. Mar a bheadh ag gluaiseacht go han-mhall chuile thaobh faoi phúicíní. Samhna sa duibheagán, cheapfá. (67)

> The hot sultry steam […] that hits the back of my throat with each hot wet breath. I feel a body I don't recognise near me as if I was in a morgue. They start to swim around mem flying softly, gently, ghostly. As if they were slow moving ghosts. Sauna in the abyss, you could reckon.

While public sex is also discussed at length in *Cion Mná*, Standún approaches the topic from a different perspective. John, Bridie's abusive husband, visits a pornographic cinema after his release from prison for battery. Describing John's masturbation in the cinema shows us how Standún depicts sexuality in public spheres. However, it is his handling of queer sex

that underscores the importance of this novel. While one could argue that Bridie and Therese's relationship is a by-product of the volatile relationship Bridie has with John, it is clear that Bridie is queer but unable to identify with lesbianism, let alone understand it. Their first sexual contact, after drinking on Christmas Eve, is a source of anxiety for Bridie. Therese's initial kiss, while the pair waltzed to Perry Como, was returned by Bridie. Interestingly, it was Bridie who took Therese by the hand and brought her to bed. Standún, however, unlike Ó Conghaile's use of detailed and colourful language to bring sexual acts to life, does not describe in detail the couple's first sexual encounter. *Cion Mná*'s handling of the sexual encounter is de-sexualised and seen as a key moment of intimacy and romantic love in the novel. We see Standún portraying the couple going to bed together. The "silencing" of lesbian sexuality is noteworthy, as it shows how Standún's efforts lack realism compared to those of Ó Conghaile. Bridie eventually begins to regret their sexual encounter and takes away from it by saying that it was "an t-aonchaoi a bhfuil mise in annmoghrá a thaispeáint" (Standún 1993, 127; "the only way I can show my love"). Bridie's ongoing relationship with Therese would suggest that there is more at play than imbedded homophobia:

> Feileann an saol seo do ch'aon duine againn. Tá mise in ann Caomhán a thógáil in áit atá compóirteach. Tá tusa mar chineál máthar aige chomh maith. Bhí trioblóidí againn araon le fir. Ach ní hin le rá gur leispiach mise. (*Ibidem*)

> This life (set-up) suits everyone. I can raise Caomhán in comfortable place. You are like a mother to him as well. We both have had troubles with men. But that is not to say that I'm a lesbian.

Queer sex, therefore, is represented in two starkly competing ways in each novel. While Ó Conghaile examines the bodily desires of John Paul in a hormonal and charged way, Standún's characters come with more baggage. In the lesbian relationship of Therese and Bridie, there is a lack of urgency to their sexual needs, which contrasts greatly with John Paul's relationships with other men. The ongoing struggle to carve out one's place in society – that of being queer and Irish – is underscored by multiple examples of heteronormativity in both novels. The pervasive and all-encompassing pressure of heteronormativity steers the desires, motives, and language of both texts throughout.

6. Heteronorms and Heternormativity

While heteronormativity, and heteronorms more generally, have been frequently discussed in literary and cultural discourses in Irish Studies, the phenomenon has rarely been analysed in the context of Irish-language literature. Warner (2000 [1999]) discusses normality and norms as a way to blend in, or as a way to avoid "visible difference" from the status quo. Both he and Berlant in "Sex in Public" (1998) define heteronormativity as the institutions of intimacy, where heterosexuality is ideologically regarded as natural and privileged in society. Heteronormativity, as a socially constructed phenomenon, is arranged as a means of protecting privilege. Heterosexuality, however, is seen as coherent, and oftentimes compulsory in society (see Rich's 1980 "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence"). Heteronormativity, therefore, is seen as a power that controls social norms and the coherency of gender, sexuality, and desire. In both *Sna Fir* and *Cion Mná*, heteronormativity and heteronorms influence the motives and decisions of their characters.

In *Sna Fir*, John Paul moved from the confines of his rural home in the Conamara Gaeltacht to Dublin, in order to fully experience queer life and to flee the confines of heteronormativity

in rural spaces. While at university, he wishes he could undertake research on homosexual love in Irish-language literature, even mentioning Pádraig Standún as a possible case study. He sees that there is a sense of loneliness in Irish-language literature and studies more generally. He expresses this when he says "Cá bhfuil fáil agamsa i litríocht na Gaeilge ar bheirt fhear agus iad ag spallaíocht le chéile ag tórramh nó oíche airneáin [...] ag titim i ngrá lena chéile agus ag gáire go hard" (Ó Conghaile 1999, 84; "Where can I find in Irish-language literature two men flirting with each other at a wake or at a night of storytelling ... falling in love with each other and laughing aloud"). He recognises how queer love isn't represented in Irish-language literature or in his home community of Ceathrú na gCloch. It is in Dublin, however, that John Paul is able to overcome the heteronormativity of Ceathrú na gCloch and to experience queer sex and love properly. Furthermore, the heteronormativity of John Paul's family is also emphasised time and again at the beginning of the novel, setting the scene for his escape to Dublin. John Paul's younger brothers, Oisín and Jason, for example, presume that John Paul's trips to Dublin are to see a girlfriend. These assumptions eventually motivate John Paul to "imeacht liom as an *nGoddamn place* seo" (25; "to take myself out of this Goddamn place"). The urban space of Dublin gives him the necessary anonymity to overcome heteronormativity. John Paul is seen as a sexual exile in Dublin's fair city, a space where he can fully experience his sexuality. It is John Paul's exile that shows how heteronormativity controls and influences queer lives, where escaping is the only means to survive.

Standún's *Cion Mná* deals with heteronormativity in the context of family. While Therese and Bridie's relationship is the central theme of the text, the cause and nature of homosexuality and being queer is questioned throughout. Therese, while explaining her lesbianism to Bridie, describes the sexual abuse she encountered as a child at the hands of her father. She describes how Wednesdays were particularly challenging, as her mother would be at bingo. She remembers how unwell she would feel due to her father's abuse, reflecting on her First Communion day (Standún 1993, 58). This troubling account of abuse is used to explain her sexual orientation, underpinned by the desire to be normal. Through this very "unnormal" sexual behaviour, Therese rejects heteronormativity. She goes on to explain that sexuality and sex were never discussed in her family, and that without her sisters she would have believed her first period was the result of her father's abuse "gurgortú a bhaindíom" (47; "that it was an injury"). This contrasts with Bridie, who rejects her queerness for much of the novel and blatantly accepts heteronorms in dialogue with Therese. She is clearly anxious that their blossoming relationship would have a negative effect on Caomhán, as he would be raised outside of the coherency of heteronormativity. This contrasts with Therese's view on queer men but also underscore her ideas on toxic masculinity more generally:

> Má iompaíonn féin, cén dochar? Bíonn formhór acu an-mhúinte agus béasach le mná. Ní thuigim féin cén mhaith a dhéanann an iomarca fearúlachta, an t-iomhá *macho* sin a bhíonn ag fir. Ceapann roinnt mhaith acu nach fir ar bith iad muna dtugann siad corrleidhce do bhean agus do ghasúr, nó go deimhin d'fhear eile. (90)

> If he changes, what harm? Most of them are very mannerly and polite to women. I don't understand what good too much masculinity, and the *macho* image has for men. Some of them don't think you're a man unless you give the odd slap to a woman and to a child, or, indeed, to another man.

Heteronormativity is time and again highlighted as an important theme in both *Sna Fir* and *Cion Mná*. While both texts deal with varying levels and experiences of heteronorms and heteronormativity, they also highlight the pervasiveness of the phenomenon. Warner and Berlant have posited that "to be against heteronormativity is not to be against norms" (1998,

557). This is seen quite clearly in both texts. While the primary characters transgress and try to move beyond heteronormativity, they recognise the power it has on them as queer individual. Their sexual transgressions, however, stand out in Irish-language literature as themes that are not often drawn upon in the canon.

7. Conclusion

Irish-language literature has been associated regularly with nationalism and with the idealisation of traditional Irish cultural identity. However, it is clear that transgressive queer themes have been discussed and portrayed in various Irish-language texts since the nineties and beyond including Cathal Ó Searcaigh's *Teach an Gheafta* (2018), which deals similarly with queer love in Irish-language literature. Coupled with the ongoing liberalisation of attitudes around sex and sexuality in Ireland, we have also seen the emergence of outward-looking contemporary Irish-language writers. Ó Conghaile and Standún both tackle queer narratives in varying ways and excavate the coming out narrative, queer sex, and heteronorms and heteronormativity in distinctive ways. While Standún's portrayal of lesbian love in *Cion Mná* is often troubling, this was the first time lesbian love had been depicted in such a way through the medium of Irish (Uí Anluain 1997, 23). Although other critics such as Ó Coigligh (1993, 25) note that it is "personal difficulties" that lead both characters to transgress heteronormativity, the text could be seen as a predecessor to Ó Conghaile's *Sna Fir*, where queer love is celebrated further as "úrscéal mór homaighnéasach na hÉireann" (Breathnach, Ní Neachtain 2010, 68; "Ireland's big gay novel"). Both texts, however, deal with queer themes in Irish-language contexts, paving the way for other writers to further develop and reflect on this theme in future texts.

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