

An Experiment in Life Writing: Evelyn Conlon's "Imagine them ..."

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Irish novelist and short story writer Evelyn Conlon was born in Co. Monaghan and lives in Dublin. Conlon has been a writer in residence at University College Dublin and in colleges around the world. She has a deep interest in Australia, where she lived from 1972 to 1975. She is an elected member of Aosdána, the Irish artists' association which honours distinguished work.

Conlon has published three collections of short stories, *My Head is Opening* (1987), *Taking Scarlet as a Real Colour* (1993) and *Telling: New and Selected Short Stories* (2000), and four novels. Her short stories have been widely anthologized and translated. Conlon's novels deal with social and political dilemmas. *Stars in the Daytime* (1989) and *A Glassful of Letters* (1998) relate the lives, loves and hates of women and girls of the Irish diaspora. *Skin of Dreams* (2003) deals with the story of Harry Gleeson, sentenced to death for the murder of a woman, a crime he did not commit. Gleeson recently received a posthumous pardon. Conlon's most recent novel *Not the Same Sky* (2013) focuses on Irish Famine orphans in the 1840s and earned her the title of Australia's newest Irish novelist. Conlon is currently working on a new collection of short stories. Her work is adept with humour and originality and she is brilliant at deploying rhetoric of inquiry, irony and wit.

The short story presents the narrative voice of a historical figure, Mary Lee, an Irish woman born in Monaghan in 1821 who married George Lee in 1844. One of her sons, Ben, was living in Adelaide at that time George died, and as he was ill, she decided to emigrate to Australia with her daughter Evelyn. Conlon's story narrates how Mary's son died a year later and, from this point on she decided to use her time tackling women's issues, first as an active member of the Social Purity Society committee, which advocated changes to the law relating to the social and legal status of young women, for example, demanding an end to child labour. The story evolves and hints that the group also succeeded in raising the age of consent from 13 to 16. At

the end of the story, Mary Lee is presented as a suffragette, the co-honorary secretary of the South Australian Women's Suffrage League, who fought non-stop for the women's vote from 1888 to December 1894, when the Australian colony granted this right¹.

Yet Conlon's "Imagine them ..." does not just offer the reader the opportunity to enjoy her always witty and thoughtful fictionalisation of historical women figures like Mary Lee and her life experiences, but also those of many other suffragettes who fought to elevate women. "Imagine them ..." also exhibits Conlon's fascination with recording these women's stories through unique formal experimentation in intertextuality and life-writing².

Regarding the interrelationship between Conlon's texts, "Imagine them ..." recalls, for example, the life experiences of some of the female characters who inhabit her most recent novel, *Not the Same Sky*, a book which draws on her Australian experience and narrates the moving story of some of the over 4,000 Irish girls aged 14 to 20, victims of the Famine, who were shipped to Sydney to work as domestic servants. These are stories of emigration as a displacement marked by pain that must be forgotten. Like Mary, who hoped that "she could depart the livid sorrow too, leave it behind as if it was an animate thing" and that "Maybe the sea would swallow up the ghostly pain that was wracking her small enough frame" (Conlon 2019, 593), Honora, one of these orphan girls, "had to try to cure herself of the journey. She didn't want to remember any of it, particularly the leaving – the part before the journey started [...] The first part of forgetting was to think of this new place as home" (Conlon 2013, 140-141). As Conlon acknowledges in an interview I conducted with her, these women had little choice³ but to depart to Australia and, when they "got to a certain point, where they could organize their lives in some way, they had to leave their pasts absolutely behind, because there was no possibility of them ever being able to recollect at ease" (Terrazas 2017, 213). Again, like Mary, who "had never seen a boat before" (2), the orphans of *Not the Same Sky* landed in Port Adelaide, coped and survived, though

¹ In 1994, many events were co-ordinated by the Women's Suffrage Centenary Steering Committee to celebrate the centenary of women's suffrage in South Australia. A bust of Mary Lee made by sculptor Patricia Moseley was chosen to be erected on North Terrace in Adelaide, to coincide with the centenary of the passing of the Constitution Amendment Act. The bronze bust of Mary Lee was unveiled in December that year in North Terrace. A plaque beneath the bust quotes Mary Lee: "My aim is to leave the world better for women than I found it".

² For more on experimentation in life-writing, see Boldrini and Novak (2017). For further discussion of Conlon's life-writing, see her reflection on gender issues in her work in Terrazas (2018, 141-145).

³ These Famine orphan girls had only "SOME choice" (Conlon 2013, 118) to go to Australia. For further discussion of this crucial passage in the book, see Terrazas (2017a; 2017b).

not always admirably. Had they stayed in Ireland, they would probably have died or lived in the worst of conditions. All these intertextual references to Conlon's novel *Not the Same Sky* not only reveal Mary's stance and life experiences, but also many recurrent topics in Conlon's fiction. However, most interestingly, several details of "Imagine them ..." are linked to Conlon's past experiences in Australia and her view of women in Ireland. Following Julia Novak's understanding of "life-writing,' as a loose umbrella term, [which] explicitly encompasses auto/biographical fiction" (Novak 2017, 2), this very brief introduction to Conlon's previously unpublished "Imagine them ..." will show that it is an example of what the chapter by Novak alone (2017, 25) defines, in her volume on experiments in life-writing with Boldrini, as an ever-evolving experimenting with, reflecting on, and intertwining of "auto", "bio", "fiction", and "graphy".

With regard to Conlon's experiment in life-writing, like Mary, she was born in Monaghan. Just as Mary finds her husband's recent death to be the best reason to tend her ill son and, to her neighbours' amazement, start a new life (Conlon 2019, 594), Conlon decided to go to Australia because this place had always been in her imagination, a pastime referenced by the title of the short story which is the object of analysis here. "Imagine them ..." shows how Mary "put the folded papers", that is, her marriage certificate and her husband's death certificate, "in an envelope and packed them in the midst of her clothes", while her daughter Evelyn – the real name of Mary Lee's daughter and Conlon's own first name – tells her mother, "Maybe you should put them in your bag" (593) to which, Mary answers: "They'll be alright here in the trunk, one less thing to have in mind, until we get there" (*ibidem*). Like Mary, who decided to start again in Australia, though things were not easy for a woman like her at the time, Conlon also went to Sydney by ship, and did all sort of jobs as she travelled around the country⁴.

Mary settled in Australia, where the words "terra firma" meant "something only to those who know different" (594)⁵, and managed to break all the moulds to elevate women. Conlon developed similar interests in tackling women's issues in her work.

Life was not smooth for Mary in Australia but, as "Imagine them ..." shows, in an empowering exercise of women's self-assertion through repetition of the same sentence at two tragic moments in Mary's life, "Not one to like the idea of lying down with the horrors of grief, the thought had come to

⁴ For more on Conlon's life experiences in Australia, see Pelan (1995).

⁵ The significance of terra firma and its association with Australia is very relevant here, since "the words" refers to terra firma, i.e. their legs were shaky after their voyage and they appreciated the meaning of these words because they had been deprived of solid ground.

her very soon after George, her husband, had died” (*ibidem*) and then, “Not one to like the idea of lying down with the horrors of this new grief [her son Ben’s death], Mary turned her head to public things” (595). Both Mary and Conlon “needed to move and do” (*ibidem*), and that same response to turmoil affected very positively the former’s suffragette vision of the world and activism as well as Conlon’s drive to write about women in Ireland and to become involved in the Irish “sexual revolution” through Irishwomen United, a radical activist group with a charter of demands.

Conlon’s “Imagine them...” is a very intimate exercise in experimentation with formal and aesthetic possibilities of rendering female subjects’ lives in new ways. Her short story is intended to both pay tribute to all the South Australian suffragettes like Mary Lee, who came from very different backgrounds, with unique personal and social circumstances, and needs, and to make the reader imagine how these suffragettes mobilised a huge petition which culminated in the Adult Suffrage Bill (1894), a very important historical moment referred to by the narrator in very evocative terms: “The petition grew in length, the pages began to stack up. Not one signature looked like another. Mary wrote pamphlets as well as letters [...] Unlike others, she could sign her own name, no fears. There had to be some advantages to being a widow she thought” (596).

Conlon’s recreation of biographies of Mary Lee and her daughter Evelyn in “Imagine them ...” breathes life into a singular idea: the relevance of women’s drive and dialogue in order to accomplish feminist revolutions that may provide wide-reaching and radical change in their situations, lifestyles, beliefs, and attitudes and, thus, improve their social circumstances and prospects. “Imagine them...” is Conlon’s experimental and creative example of how women of any era can stay true to themselves. As a writer she has an informed view of this, having been involved with Irishwomen United, which published the feminist magazine *Banshee*. Many of their goals have since been achieved, including the removal of legal and bureaucratic obstacles to equality, the legalization of contraception and divorce in the 1990s, and abortion in 2018.

In an interview conducted by Rebecca Pelan (1995), Conlon rejects the suggestion that she has been described “as the new Edna O’Brien”, yet she acknowledges that she and O’Brien have something in common as writers: that they certainly did change or challenge what was being written at the time by Irish women (62). The short story “Imagine them ...” is an excellent example of this, because it is not only a unique story, highly evocative, and a brilliant example of experimentation in life-writing, but also a tribute to the Irish-Australian suffragettes, to their letters, to their birth and marriage certificates, to their photographs, and to their life experiences. All these “folded [...] documents” (Conlon 2019, 593) which are now kept either in public archives or private homes for us to open up, examine in detail, and

research, demand of us that we stay true to them and their aims, to take a pause in the frantic world we live in now and put aside the “more immediate concerns that have to be bedded”, as Conlon puts it (*ibidem*). “Imagine them ...” is not a short story to read quickly, but one to digest and consider all the events fictionalised therein, because they have left a huge mark on our present. Perhaps such an engaged reading would enable us to imagine what these women felt, what was happening, and who they were.

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