# EXPROPRIATED BODIES: VICTIMS OF FATHER-DAUGHTER INCEST IN THREE CONTEMPORARY IRISH NOVELS*

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Abstract

This article explores the representation of father-daughter incest victims as expropriated bodies in three contemporary Irish novels: *In Night's City* (1982) by Dorothy Nelson, *The Invisible Worm* (1991) by Jennifer Johnston and *Another Alice* (1996) by Lia Mills. The protagonists of these novels are young women who, in order to cope with life, try to come to terms with a painful past marked by abominable episodes of sexual abuse. The literary representation of their bodies, locus of sexual exploitation, is examined from a feminist psychoanalytic approach with a dual focus: first, attention is paid to the way in which these bodies are perceived by the perpetrators —as commodities—, by the girls themselves —as alienated properties without any value— and by Irish Society in a more broad sense —as abject; and second, analysis is shifted to the inner struggle the protagonists undergo to reappropriate their bodies and, consequently, their lives.

Keywords: incest, sexual abuse, psychoanalytic feminism, abjection, melancholia, Ireland.

Resumen

El artículo analiza tres novelas irlandesas contemporáneas en las que se aborda la temática del incesto padre-hija: *In Night's City* (1982) de Dorothy Nelson, *The Invisible Worm* (1991) de Jennifer Johnston y *Another Alice* (1996) by Lia Mills, con el propósito de estudiar la figura de la víctima como cuerpo expropiado. Las protagonistas de estas narrativas son mujeres jóvenes que intentan superar un pasado traumático, plagado de episodios de abuso sexual abominables, para hacer frente a la vida. La representación literaria de sus cuerpos, lugar de explotación sexual, se estudia desde la perspectiva del feminismo psicoanalítico con una doble finalidad: en primer lugar, prestar atención al modo en el que estos son concebidos por los padres (como objetos), por las propias víctimas (como propiedades alienadas carenes de valor) y por la sociedad irlandesa en su conjunto (como lo abjecto); y en segundo lugar, exponer la lucha interna que emprenden las protagonistas con el fin de retomar el control de sus cuerpos y, en consecuencia, de sus vidas.

Palabras clave: incesto, abuso sexual, feminismo psicoanalítico, abyección, melancolía, Irlanda.

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This paper will examine the representation of father-daughter incest victims in contemporary Irish narrative, focusing specifically on three novels written in the final two decades of the twentieth century: *In Night's City* (1982) by Dorothy Nelson, *The Invisible Worm* (1991) by Jennifer Johnston and *Another Alice* (1996) by Lia Mills.[1] The authors of those works are amongst the most successful, accomplished and respected Irish writers and hence their portrayals assume particular potential interest. It will be seen that the young protagonists of these narratives have been sexually abused by their fathers, emotionally neglected by their powerless mothers and openly stigmatised by Irish society. Devastated, they develop a strong sense of dislocation and eventually become split subjects as they need to keep their consciousness —mind— apart from defilement —body.

*In Night's City* narrates the story of Sara Kavanagh and her mother, Esther, who revisit their past while keeping vigil over the corpse of the paterfamilias, whose funeral is about to take place. At the beginning of the novel, readers learn immediately that Sara was sexually abused by her father when she was a child, and with the complicity of her mother, who herself had also been a victim of incest. *The Invisible Worm* tells the story of Laura Quinlan, a thirty-seven year-old woman haunted by the ghosts of the past: a pederast father and a negligent mother, who, unable to cope with the situation, commits suicide as soon as her daughter confesses to her the source of her grief. A strong sense of fear and guilt blight Laura's existence, impelling her into silence and social isolation, even long after her parents' death. In *Another Alice*, Lia Mills examines the way in which a damaged daughter, Alice Morrisey, relates to an abusive father and to an "apparently cold, complicitous, and uncaring mother" (Moloney 181), both of whom regard her as an abject being.

These novels will be analysed from a feminist psychoanalytic approach and with a dual focus. Attention will first centre on how the bodies of these young protagonists, locus of sexual exploitation, are perceived by the perpetrators of incest —as commodities which can be used and abused at will; on how their bodies are viewed by the victims themselves —as alienated properties without any value; and, in a broader sense, on how those bodies are seen by Irish society —as defiled matter which needs to be purified in order to re-enter the symbolic order. Secondly, the analysis will aim to show how the three girls undergo an inner struggle to be able to regain control of their bodies, and most relevantly to be able to accept and enjoy them, thus becoming what Julia Kristeva calls "subjects-in-process" —*sujet-en-procès*—, that is, a subject who "is in the process of being set up" (Kristeva, "Mourning the Lost Mother" 339).

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[1] For an analysis of this subject on Edna O'Brien's work, see my essay "Child Sexual Abuse and Traumatic Identity in *Down by the River by Edna O'Brien,*" published in *Identities on the Move. Contemporary Representations of New Sexualities and Gender Identities*, edited by Silvia Pilar Castro Borrego and María Isabel Romero Ruiz in 2015.

Dorothy Nelson, Jennifer Johnston and Lia Mills dare to lay bare a topic, incest, which is often called "the ultimate taboo" or the "universal taboo" because it is regarded as the gravest violation of the rules of human society (Finkelhor 85), a violation which is based upon the father's patriarchal right to use female members of his family to provide him with love, service and sex (Herman 49). In writing such novels, these Irish authors suggest that incest is secretly but not infrequently practised in Ireland. This is consistent with the information contained in a press release issued in 1993 by Monica Prendiville, president of the Irish Countrywomen's Association, in which she openly discusses the prevalence of incest in Irish society. She states that at least one third of Irish women have been subjected to sexual abuse and that many thousands of Irish girls and women have been victims of incest (281). In the same vein, Sarah-Anne Buckley adds that "for victims of incest in Ireland resistance was more a rarity than an actuality" (168). In the 1990s, women's organisations and individual women like Prendiville made incest an issue. When media coverage of this topic explodes, it enters the nation's discourse and the number of victims who gather strength and confidence to report it increases. Formerly a taboo topic hardly ever discussed in Ireland —as it had been contained "within the private sphere, the space of male privilege" (Conrad 82), father-daughter incest became then the "focus of an increasingly substantial body of sociological, psychoanalytic, and clinical discourse; the subject of modern novels, TV docu-dramas, and films" (Ford 1). Nelson, Johnston and Mills are, no doubt, part of a collective attempt to bravely and outspokenly denounce the cultural conditions that makes father-daughter incest possible in contemporary Ireland. Moreover, they portray the devastating consequences for the victims, whose bodies are assaulted, colonised, controlled and silenced; and whose minds are alienated, haunted by memories of abuse, troubled by recurrent nightmares and weakened by self-contempt. These writers also describe the victims' struggle to eventually acquire some voice and some agency with which to reappropriate their own bodies and rematerialise them with one purpose: re-entering the symbolic order, defined by Judith Butler as the "register of regulatory ideality" (*Bodies that Matter* 18). Their protagonists —Sara Kavanagh in *In Night's City*, Laura Quinlan in *The Invisible Worm* and Alice Morrisey in *Another Alice*— come "to symbolize all the abused children, battered women, and incest survivors whose stories bear witness to the underside of Irish nationalism, stories that men like [their fathers] wish to suppress because they do not fit into the image of the glorious new nation" (Ingman 340).

## 1. THE FATHER-PERPETRATOR'S PERCEPTION OF HIS DAUGHTER'S BODY: A DOCILE, EXPROPRIATED AND DEFILED BODY

Even in late twentieth century Ireland, social, religious and political forces joined to perpetuate patriarchy and —within this ideological framework— the role of the father as the absolute ruler of the household. Thus, the paterfamilias becomes the head of the family unit and his authority is regarded as sacred and protected by law. This would explain why the father-perpetrator in each of these novelistic


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narratives thinks he has the right to impose his will upon his wife and progeny as a natural prerogative. He is "the boss in the house" (Nelson 46) and, unfortunately, his nature is that of a "[t]yrant" (Mills 41). The "patriarchal law, the law of the father decrees that the 'product' of sexual union, the child, shall belong exclusively to the father, be marked by his name [and] that the womb which bears that child should be a passive receptacle with no claims on the product" (Gallop 156). Therefore, the paterfamilia's sense of power develops parallel to an instinct of ownership that leads him to believe that he owns his wife and children in the same way he owns a house, a car or a horse. In this order of things, family members are bound to him by a bond that only he can release. In *In Another Alice*, the protagonist literally confesses to her psychotherapist that, in childhood, her father made her feel that she was one of his properties: "He was my father, [therefore] he owned me" (Mills 78). The father-perpetrators in these three novels control their wives and children by physically and psychologically abusing them. They skilfully employ what Kristeva coins "the power of horror" to make sure that every single member of the family unit respects their decisions and obeys their commands, no matter how perverse those orders may be. Rebelling against this order of things would seem to imply rebellion against natural, religious and social laws.

It is no surprise, then, that their daughters do not defend themselves when they are raped; but simply keep quiet and let them act. Alice describes this strategy as follows: "I have to be careful not to make him angry. So I act as if I see nothing, hear nothing, say nothing. I do what he tells me to do" (Mills 347). The victims' bodies, small and weak, become "passive surface[s]" (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 4) that reflect the values of Irish society, which imposes women's subjection to men and children's obedience to parents. As Karin Meiselman indicates: "To truly understand the passivity of the daughter, one needs to imagine the situation as it is perceived through the eyes of a child. Especially in a paternalistic family, the daughter has been taught to obey her father in all situations, to anticipate punishment for any show of defiance, and to believe that what her father does is unquestionably in her best interests" (159). In these novels, the father-perpetrator regards his victim's body as a "puppet", a "rag doll with floppy limbs and empty head" (Mills 220). In his eyes, she is, to employ Luce Irigaray's expression, a "commodity", i.e, a utilitarian object without "any possible identity or communicable value" (Irigaray, *This Sex* 188). This means that she is available to be used, abused, or even annihilated or, in Michel Foucault's expression, hers is a "docile body": a body which can be "manipulated, shaped and trained" to obey commands (Foucault 136). Bodies become docile through discipline and the perpetrator knows how to implement it: "All the activity of the disciplined individual must be punctuated and sustained by injunctions whose efficacity rests on brevity and clarity; the order does not need to be explained or formulated, it must trigger off the required behaviour and that is enough" (Foucault 166). Thus, Michael Morrisey in *Another Alice* commands his daughter: "*turn over*, *open your legs*, *lie still*, *stop whining*" (Mills 347). Far from displaying parental affection, the fathers in these novels, monstrous tyrants, exhibit a terrible despotism. Unable to feel any sense of empathy for their victims, they are ready to manipulate and torture their small vulnerable bodies nearly to death as


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if they were inert, insensitive and worthless matter. For example, in *The Invisible Worm*, Senator O'Meara inflicts such pain upon his daughter's body when sexually abusing her that Laura thinks she is about to perish: "With his left hand he took her hair [...] and winding it into a long, dark rope, he pulled it round her neck. He silenced the only word she could say. He pulled until she thought she was going to faint" (Johnston 156).

This sexual abuse and physical cruelty, as Susie Orbach states, "is designed to show that the master of the body is not its inhabitant but its torturer" (108). The expropriation of the girl's body has specific territorial connotations since she becomes a kind of expatriate in relation to her own physicality, becomes a kind of surface that the "colonizer" marks as his own with sweat, blood and sperm, and where he freely exercises his "male, phallic power" (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 70). Without a body, the victim is totally disempowered and in this condition, she can only surrender[2] and accept a subordinate role, that of "the servant of the militant male, his shadow" (Cixous 420). "The Law of the Father" is thus enforced, a Law that according to Judith Butler "dictates the 'being' and 'having' positions" of men and women within the symbolic order (*Bodies that Matter* 139), a Law "that produces the trembling of the body prepared for its inscription" and "marks it [...] with the symbolic stamp of sex" (101). The perpetrator uses his "asymmetrical, irrational, wily, uncontrollable power" (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 70) to impose this law and oppress his victim, a member of the other sex, which according to patriarchal order is "unintelligible" (Butler, *Bodies that Matter 39*) and according to the Catholic Church is "synonymous with a radical evil" (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 70). In these narratives, the perpetrators can even try to convey their misogynistic prejudices to their daughters in justification of their atrocities. They want to convince the girls that they deserve the harm inflicted upon them when sexually abused, that it is warranted as a kind of punishment for being abject matter or *massa damnata*, whether for Alice for being "bad and dirty" (Mills 343), Laura for being "mad" and Sara for being a "fuckin' little whore" (Nelson 27).

As "discourse constructs the subject" (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 8), the three perpetrators use its effective power to materialize their daughters' body in derogatory terms. Their hate speech puzzles and injures their victims as it actually constitutes them at the moment of its utterance (Butler, *Excitable Speech* 18).[3] As a consequence, the victims end up accepting the labels imposed upon them by their male progenitors as if those descriptions corresponded to a factual reality. So, Alice says: "I am, *dirty*, *filthy*, *slut*, *evil*" (Mills 1996: 347), Laura affirms: "I'm just mad" (Johnston 136), and Sara simply attaches the nasty labels addressed to her on her imaginary alter ego whom she calls Maggie.

[2] "A woman without a body [...] can't possibly be a good fighter", states Cixous (420).

[3] Butler calls it "identity through injury" (*The Psychic Life* 105).

## 2. THE VICTIM'S PERCEPTION OF HER BODY DURING AND AFTER SEXUAL ABUSE: A DEFILED, FRAGMENTED, HATEFUL AND ALIEN BODY

Bodies "must be clean and proper in order to be fully symbolic" (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 102) —that is, in order to be incorporable into the "register of regulatory ideality." Before being sexually assaulted, Sara Kavanagh, Laura Quinlan and Alice Morrisey perceive themselves as "normal" as they comply with the necessary requirements to be part of the symbolic order. Their respective minds and bodies are clean and proper according to Irish religious and cultural regulatory ideality. They all seem to share some highly positive features before being raped: they are intelligent, they love reading, they are eager to learn, they are sensitive, they are mentally and physically healthy, and they love the company of people though they have a rich inner world that makes them somehow special. These singular features are apparent in for instance, Alice Morrisey's belief that she is a heroine from the ancient world, a secret survivor of the Fianna[4] (Mills 27), and in Laura Quinlan's proud memory of her own courageous portrayal of the heroine in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* at school (Johnston 28).

However, after incestuous relations take place, the protagonists start perceiving themselves as defiled by those who cover their bodies with sweat, blood and sperm. In fact, Alice Morrisey thinks her father uses her "as a toilet" (Mills 381), a receptacle of dirt; Laura conceives herself as "Bruised... No, unclean. Marked, marred by uncleanness. Dirty. Foul. [...] Defiled. Stained, smirched" (Johnston 133). As the potency of the pollution of defilement is proportional to the potency of the prohibition that founds it (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 69), and since incest is one of the "two taboos of totemism with which the morality of man begins" (Freud 185), its potency to defile is huge. Once defiled by these body fluids, the girls lack their "own and clean self" (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 53) and, as a result, become abject and inferior beings who must occupy a position on the margins of the symbolic order. This stigma differentiates them from what Kristeva calls "the normal category of normal people" (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 3-4). To get rid of "polluting" body fluids and their sense of defilement, the young girls resort either to water or fire which are recurrent symbols of purification and rebirth: Laura launches herself into a rough sea; Alice holds herself against an old steam pipe in the bathroom "raising red weals on her legs. Furious that she [...cannot] stay there long enough to scorch and sear something slimy and horrible from her skin..." (Mills 270); and Sara washes herself with steaming hot water with the purpose to peel her flesh off in layers till her bones are completely bare (Nelson 102-103).

According to Sigmund Freud, "the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego" [in Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 13]. This would explain the reason why the protagonists of the novels, whose bodies are defiled, marked, and abject, become split subjects. In

[4] Mythological Irish warriors who featured in the stories of the Fenian Cycle.

Kristeva's terms, in order to avoid total collapse, they need to keep their consciousness —I/subject/inside/mind— apart from defilement —Unconscious/the other/object/outside/body— (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 30). The experience of sexual abuse is so unbearable for them that they need to detach themselves from their bodies, where the horrendous sexual assaults are taking place. They imagine they are watching the incest acts from outside their bodies as if they were witnessing them rather than suffering them. Dorothy Nelson describes Sara's process of binary splitting —dissociation of mind and body— and the resultant death drive in the following way: "the Dark is over me with the snake. [...] The colours are eatin' me up. And then I'm not me anymore. I'm Maggie. The colours are eatin' Maggie up. So it is all right. It is all right" (Nelson 58). Sara's body and mind end up being two entirely different entities, therefore they receive two different names: Sara stands for the conscious/mind and Maggie symbolises the unconscious/defiled body of the once unified subject. Maggie, the other self, is not only the barrier protecting Sara from psychological collapse, but also the addressee of her confessions, as no one within her family or social circle seems or wants to take notice of her distressing situation. Sara and Maggie explicitly represent the protagonist's schizophrenia that results from the trauma of incest, Sara/Maggie provides two different views of the same phenomenon: detached from her own body, Sara can look upon Joseph Kavanagh as a father, whereas Maggie, damaged body, can only gaze at him as "a man" turned into beast (Nelson 102).[5] Passive, silent and "sexed" matter, Maggie acquires voice and some agency in the last chapter of *In Night's City*. She not only revolts against her father's cruelty by designing, though unsuccessfully, a scheme to provoke his death, but she also manifests her disapproval of Sara's betrayal: "I wouldn't forgive Sara for still loving him after what he'd done to me" (Nelson 103-104). Laura Quinlan's mind also projects an alter ego: as early as on the first page of *The Invisible Worm*, the reader meets another woman who, unlike Laura, seems to run away from the house where she feels trapped. Alice Morrisey, however, experiences what has been termed "parcellary splitting" (Klein in Kristeva, *Black Sun* 18), since her very self seems to be divided into many replicas. She very often "sees" children, also victims of incest, confined in a dark space. She eventually realises that each of them is a copy of herself, that every single time she was sexually assaulted by her father, a fragment of her own flesh came off to become a new being, and that though also weak, enslaved and doomed, "They were all me. One for every filthy time he touched me. Some of them even liking it, [...] until he hurt them. Us. Me." (Mills 383). Thus the little girls' bodies are not only defiled and marked, but also broken, incomplete, deeply wounded. Their wound is not only physical, but also, by osmosis, psychical. This invention of another self, this regarding one's body as "the other", is a defence mechanism employed by the girls to cope with the fear and sorrow which are provoked by incest. As Mary MacNamara, the protagonist

[5] Similarly, Sara regards Esther Kavanagh as a mother, whereas Maggie refers to her as "an old woman" obsessed with cleaning (Nelson 102).

of Edna O'Brien's *Down by the River*, another novel dealing with incest, states: "It does not hurt if you are not you" (O'Brien 5).

The victims of incest in the novels here examined regard their bodies, centre of abuse and suffering, as alien and hateful matter. They assume, as conveyed by the perpetrators, that their bodies have no value, that they are "thing[s] dragged towards any shape and property" (Irigaray, *Speculum* 176). As such, these become the uncanny strangers on display —the ailing or dead figures— which so often turn out to be the nasty companion (Cixous 419). Sara Kavanagh hates her body so much that, as already noted, she decides to dissociate herself entirely from it and call it Maggie, who, in turn, shows her self-loathing by affirming '"I hate myself," I said. "Hate, hate, hate, myself" (Nelson 111). As sites of phallic inscription, these "confiscated" bodies are attacked, both consciously and unconsciously, by the girls themselves. Their self-destructive behaviour involves eating disorders,[6] addictions to drugs and alcohol, self-inflicted pain, self-mutilation and suicidal attempts. Alice's case is most noteworthy: she bites herself to the point of bleeding, bruises herself, scratches herself, and makes marks on her arms and legs (Mills 269). By their self-inflicted wounds, the protagonists express what they are unable to confess to others through words. In Orbach's terms, they want to "bring an attentiveness to a body that has been neglected, disregarded or mistreated" in order to amplify their pain "as a mechanism of self-communication and self-expression" (108). By exerting violence on their own bodies, they are actively implementing a strategy of resistance; they are actively rejecting what they believe to be a possession of the tyrant. This is proof that they can exercise some kind of control over their bodies as a way to re-appropriate them. Paradoxically, the dialectic of power implies that resistance to bodily abuse is implemented by equal resort to bodily abuse.

Judith Butler has asserted that, in an incestuous relationship, the alienation of the child's body implies a further deprivation: that of his/her psychic life[7] (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 155). Laura Quinlan refers to this when she analyses the impact incest has had on her life: "That was what he had stolen from me… the expectation of love, joy, peace" (Johnston 144). Deprived of their psychic life, Sara Kavanagh, Laura Quinlan and Alice Morrisey project themselves onto wounded, bloody, cadaverous and indolent bodies. This can be most clearly illustrated through two quotations, one from *The Invisible Worm* and one from *In Night's City*. In *The Invisible Worm*, Laura Quinlan states that she lives in a perpetual vegetative state: "It's as if there were a stopper somewhere in my body, and when it is pulled out I become slowly drained of hope, love, confidence, even the ability to feel pain; I become an empty skin" (Johnston 125). In *In Night's City*, Sara Kavanagh mentally addresses her mother saying: "Ma I'm dead would you please come and feed me to the dog or else mix me up in cow dung and send me down the country to the farmers as

[6] Sara falls prey to both anorexia and bulimia, while Laura and Alice become anorexic.

[7] Since "it is often precisely the child's love that is exploited in the scene of incest" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 155).

fresh manure" (Nelson 68). Both fragments seem to show that incest, defilement and death are closely connected. When defiled by incest, the girls' bodies become "flesh in the state of decay" (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 186) and eventually fall "beyond the limit —cadere, cadaver" (3). Unable to clearly think, speak or act, their behaviour coincides with that associated with the "melancholy woman", depicted by Kristeva as "the dead one [...]. Modest, silent, without verbal or desiring bonds with others, she wastes away by striking moral and physic blows against herself" (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 30).

Born in families where physical and psychological abuse is highly frequent, where members relate to each other in a non-protective and non-affective way, where loyalty and silence are insisted upon to "keep [...] up the family name" (Mills 291), Sara, Laura, and Alice are unable to verbally express the cause of their distress. They cannot even resort to their mothers for "help. Safety. Reassurance. Love" (Johnston 149). Alice is unable to tell her mother, Elaine Morrisey, the source of her suffering, as Elaine is always busy, tired and cross. Rather than a source of relief, Elaine is a source of distress since she continually puts negative labels on everything Alice does, and punishes her, both psychologically and physically, for every single action she considers deviant. As a consequence, Alice develops a strong sense of guilt which leads her to conclude that she deserves what is happening to her and, therefore, to accept it with stoicism. Laura Quinlan and Sara Kavanagh dare to reveal their secret to their female progenitors, but neither Harriet O'Meara —Laura's mother— nor Esther Kavanagh —Sarah's mother— provides any soothing credit, helpful protection or healing affection. The passive-dependent personalities of the mothers lead them to align with their husbands whether by facilitating, concealing or justifying violent actions against their daughters. In Judith Herman's expression, due to the "enormous power imbalance between the father[s] and mother[s]" in patriarchal families, the latter "are terrified of any assertion of power" (in Caruth 133). This would explain the way in which Harriet addresses her daughter when informed that she has been victim of incest: "We have to carry on as if nothing had ever happened. [...] Get up like a good girl, and go to school. [...] Please don't hate him, Laura. Think how frightened he must be" (Johnston 177). Sara's mother, Esther Kavanagh, a victim of incest herself, however, prefers to ignore the truth. Although she becomes a bystander at the girl's incestuous abuse, Esther tries to convince the victim that she must look towards abuse not as a reality, but as "a bad dream" (Nelson 8). These mothers —who withhold love, attention, support and sympathy when their daughters are sexually assaulted by their fathers— effectively contribute to reinforcing the strong death drive that their daughters experience. They represent a type of devouring motherhood that has very little to do with the prototypical one —that associated to the figure of the Virgin Mary— which is embodied in the devoted and loving mother who constantly protects her offsprings from any harm, and who teaches them how to keep themselves within the symbolic order by adhering to "positive" values and by keeping "a clean and proper body". If "maternal authority is the trustee of the self's clean and proper body", as Kristeva states (*Powers of Horror* 72), then the mothers of the protagonists clearly fail to comply with their responsibility.

In addition, the victims of father-daughter incest become marginal elements not only within but also outside their family framework. Damaged, defiled, melancholic and silenced bodies, the protagonists of these novels cannot be included in "the normal category of normal people" (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 3-4). Within the imagination of these "normal people" who represent the patriarchal and Catholic order in Ireland, the bodies of Sara, Laura and Alice evoke an irrational fear which they associate with the abject, defined by Kristeva as that that "disturbs identity, system, order" (*Powers of Horror* 4). For Irish society, these girls embody that which "is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that dissembles" (4). To protect the symbolic order, social agents not only spot and label the victims of incest as abject bodies, they also try to transform these into "clean and proper" ones. Therefore, the protagonists are forced to undergo, first, a process of purification and, second, a process of re-materialisation to become "true" Irish girls and thus re-enter the symbolic order. Different strategies are devised for this purpose, and some of them —like confinement or medical treatment— constitute, once more, the appropriation of their bodies. Alice Morrisey and Sara Kavanagh are taken to the doctor in search of a medical treatment which could solve their physical and psychical disorders. The possibility of a stay at a hospital is discussed in the case of Alice. Laura Quinlan is imprisoned at home by her own husband who wants to exercise a tight control upon her (Johnston 52) because he believes she is "crazy" (15). Classified as abject bodies, controlled for being insane and injured by hate speech, the protagonists develop a sense of mistrust, fear and insecurity. Vulnerable, like "an unshelled snail" (Johnston 40), they retreat to their homes —very often to their bedrooms— in search of isolation and protection. Laura and Alice are prototypically house-bound and agoraphobic, the former literally states: "People frighten me. Here [at home] I am protected from people" (Johnston 94). They epitomise the "ego, wounded to the point of annulment" (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 47).

## 3. REAPPROPRIATING THEIR OWN BODIES: VICTIMS STRIVING "TO COME ALIVE"

Memories of sexual abuse make the protagonists relive the terrors of the past: "I live with voices, touches, the violations of the past" says Laura Quinlan (Johnston 57). The past seems to condition the present and the future. As victims of incest, they find themselves trapped in an outside-of-meaning, repetitive, marginal and invisible existence. However, the lesson they must learn at the end of their stories is, in Cixous's words, that "the future must no longer be determined by the past" (Cixous 416) and that if "sex [is] itself materialized" (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 10) by repetition, it can be, by the same procedure, re-materialised (2). So, what Sara, Laura and Alice must do in order to re-enter the symbolic order is to assimilate and persistently repeat, and thereby establish a new pattern of behaviour.

The death of the perpetrators, the detachment from "dysfunctional mothers" and, most importantly, the bond with people who provide them with support, confidence, kindness and affection are all elements that offer Alice and Laura possibilities for re-materialization through opening up a new horizon of experiences. To fully acknowledge their past and come to terms with it, Alice Morrisey counts on her psychotherapist and Laura Quinlan depends on Dominic O'Hara. This support is crucial for both of them in reconstructing themselves as "proper and clean bodies" and in recovering their original psychosomatic unity through regaining what they lost when their bodies were alienated from them by sexual abuse: they regain self-esteem, self-respect, self-confidence and self-ownership. But only Alice, having completed a lengthy process of psychotherapy, becomes a real survivor. She realises the achievement when she starts feeling love for herself: "Something warm stirred inside her. She was shocked to realise that what she felt was love. As she recognised it, it grew. Love for herself, both then and now. Love and a fierce kind of pride" (Mills 350). Sara Kavanagh, however, is not as lucky as the other two characters. She cannot find someone ready to help her to produce a testimony of her traumatic past, to accept it and therefore to overcome it. As a result, her psyche does not evolve emotionally in a significant way over the years. This is illustrated by the fact that, even as an adult, she clings to a version of an ideal patriarchal family reality, one which she made up as a kid to cope with fear and pain: "My Ma was a good woman. Da beat us sometimes but that's because we were bad. He loved us all the same. And my Ma loved me. My Ma LOVED ME." (Nelson 113).

At the end of their respective journeys, the protagonists want to abandon their states of lethargy and to rearticulate their minds and bodies in order to "come alive" again (Johnston 180-181). Laura Quinlan feels able to set fire to the place where her father molested her, her new sense of power can be easily appreciated in the way she addresses Dominic, who helps her accomplish this ritual of purification: "I don't want you to speak. Not a word. I am generalissimo. I am in charge" (Johnston 166). Alice Morrisey feels satisfied with her own transformation into "another Alice", with her successful career as a photographer, and with her role as a mother. Her goal in life is now "to live well", to discover unknown places and enjoy new experiences in the company of the person she most loves, her daughter Holly. Alice's attitude is that of the triumphant survivor; aided by a psychotherapist, she has successfully learnt to "denaturalise" sexual abuse, to overcome its effects (Champagne 2) and to inhabit her own body again. Laura Quinlan does not go as far as Alice Morrissey in the process of deconstruction and reconstruction of her bodily sense, but she is, at least, on the right path to develop a new and more positive bodily ego. Laura's and Sara's bodies are at this stage not only in need of action, but also open to love. These protagonists seem to claim "the right to pleasure, to *jouissance*, to passion" (Irigarary, "The Bodily Encounter" 421): when thinking about the future, they link any chance of experiencing happiness with male partners who could offer them the empathy and affection they long for. Laura's last thoughts in the novel are devoted to Dominic O'Hara: "I smile at the thought of that man. *Prehaps* my dreams will in the future be of him" (181). Sara's reflections are directed to a yet-unknown man who could help her re-enter the symbolic order as wife and mother: "Someday I'll get married and have children [...]. Everything will be all right then" (Nelson 113-14). As this indicates, the protagonists of *In Night's City* by Dorothy Nelson, *The Invisible Worm* by Jennifer Johnston and *Another Alice* by Lia Mills, though experiencing and reacting towards incest in a similar way when they are still only girls, they "come alive" and reappropriate their own bodies as adults, albeit to different degrees, depending on their personal features and social bonds.

If there is agreement with Kristeva that "An enunciation [...] amounts to a denunciation" (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 131), then it is more than apparent that Dorothy Nelson, Jennifer Johnston and Lia Mills denounce father-daughter incest as an extremely destructive hazard that may face the female sex within the closed and hidden reality of patriarchal family life. Their depictions and characterisations bluntly depict victims as alienated bodies who are discursively constructed as defiled matter not only by perpetrators, but also by "the normal category of normal people" in order to justify their appropriation, sexual exploitation, subjection and marginalization. The authors also condemn this phenomenon as thoroughly unacceptable describing the devastating and long-lasting effects it has on its victims, who will need to undergo a complex and lengthy mental process in order to satisfactorily reappropriate their bodies and, consequently, re-possess themselves and their lives.

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