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Rewriting Joyce's *Dubliners* for the 21st Century: Michèle Forbes' "Clay" and Paul Murray's "A Painful Case"

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Abstract
This article compares two of James Joyce's stories from *Dubliners* (1914), "Clay" and "A Painful Case," with their rewritings by Michèle Forbes and Paul Murray in *Dubliners 100: Fifteen New Stories Inspired by the Original* (2014). Besides setting the rewritings in contemporary Dublin, Forbes and Murray change the gender of some characters. While in Joyce's "Clay," the protagonist is an unmarried middle-aged woman, Forbes' version features an overweight single young man. In Murray's "A Painful Case," the gender of the protagonist, James Duffy, stays the same as in Joyce; however, instead of Duffy's close relationship with a married woman, the story focuses on his friendship with a monk who is revealed to be a closeted gay. In turn, Forbes' and Murray's rewritings update the portrayal of diverse members of Irish society – solitary women and men of various ages, while including more explicitly than Joyce those of homosexual orientation.

Key words
James Joyce; contemporary Irish short story; rewriting; intertextuality; sexuality

Introduction

Almost six decades ago, the Bulgarian French philosopher and literary critic Julia Kristeva published her seminal essay "Word, Dialogue, and Novel" (1966), in which she coined the term intertextuality. In particular, she wrote: "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*" (1986: 37, italics in original). The statement has perhaps become increasingly more valid in the years to come, as numerous canonical literary works have been used as source texts and thus rewritten by contemporary authors. Also, other theoreticians have elaborated on

Kristeva's theoretical work. For instance, Matei Calinescu highlights there are often "diachronic fluctuations of the various genres of rewriting" (1993: 143), as contemporary authors update the source texts by situating them closer to their own time.

As this article aims to compare two of James Joyce's short stories, "Clay" and "A Painful Case," from his famed short story collection *Dubliners* (1914) with their rewritings by contemporary Irish writers, Michèle Forbes and Paul Murray, [1] it is worth noting that Joyce himself often found inspiration for his writing in the authors he had read. Joyce's magnum opus *Ulysses* (1922) updates Homer's epic poem *Odyssey*, as Ulysses is the Latinised name of Odysseus, and the eighteen chapters of Joyce's novel correspond to the episodes and characters in Homer's text. Accordingly, in a recent treatise on intertextuality, Scarlett Baron finds "a sphere of conscious and unconscious repetition" in both *Ulysses* and Joyce's last published novel *Finnegans Wake* (1939) – "texts in which quotation, cliché, and myriad other forms of second-hand language abound" (2020: 8). Baron's earlier study on intertextuality, *'Strandentwining Cable': Joyce, Flaubert, and Intertextuality* (2012), focuses on Flaubert's influence on Joyce's writing, elaborating on earlier related research. While the quote in the title comes from *Ulysses*, [2] Baron also mentions twelve stories from *Dubliners* in her analysis.

Just like Joyce read authors writing before him, contemporary Irish writers undoubtedly read Joyce. *Dubliners* continues to be widely read, studied, and taught in the twenty-first century. For the month of April 2012, the collection was selected for the One City, One Book reading scheme so that during the month, the reading of *Dubliners* was extensively promoted throughout the city of Dublin in a series of events co-ordinated by Dublin City Public Libraries. On this occasion, a new edition of the book was published by O'Brien Press, with an introduction written by the Irish writer John Boyne, praising the collection in the following way:

> It's hard to imagine a more appropriate book for One City, One Book 2012 than *Dubliners*. It's interested in all of us, rich and poor, old and young, men and women. It's filled with humour and love, pain and loss – and which of our lives do not contain elements of each of these? Above all, it rings with a love of these streets, of the voices of the people who inhabit them, their wit, their style, their optimism even as the world collapses around them. (2012)

Boyne thus highlights the wide range of universal themes included in the short stories; accordingly, besides *Dubliners* being a quintessential Irish book, the strong sense of place employed by the author throughout the text does not prevent readers from outside Ireland from connecting themselves to the characters. Given the status of *Dubliners* in Ireland as well as its universal appeal, it is perhaps not surprising that in 2014, on the centenary of its first publication, a short story collection entitled *Dubliners 100: Fifteen New Stories Inspired by the Original* was published by Tramp Press. [3] The stories were mostly written specifically for this project; their authors are both male and female and come from across gen-

erations. As the editor Thomas Morris explains in the introduction, the writers were asked "to tell the story again, but in their own voice" (2014: ix). While all the stories use the same titles as Joyce and even quote the opening sentence of the original story right after the title, many of the authors make considerable changes to the original texts. In any case, Morris closes the introduction by expressing a belief that "reading these new stories will undoubtedly diffract the loveliest of lights across Joyce's own work, offering new readings and entry points into the originals (they could even be read as creative essays on Joyce's stories)" (2014: xi). Besides moving the temporal setting to the early twenty-first century, another authorial strategy employed by a significant number of contributors to *Dubliners 100* is a gender reversal of the protagonist or another character, which also applies to the two stories this article will focus on. In connection to that, the following analysis will compare Joyce's subtle portrayal of sexual desire and repression with more explicit thematization of sexuality in the rewritings, aiming to illustrate the shifting views of sexuality in contemporary Ireland. The fact that both Forbes and Murray have selected sexuality as their focal points not only suggests the difference between early twentieth century and contemporary sexual mores but also aligns with one of the foci in current Joyce criticism (Brown 2011).

Halloween in "Clay": from barmbracks and fortune telling to devil's shiny horns

The protagonist of Joyce's "Clay" is Maria, an unmarried middle-aged woman and a devout Catholic. The text provides no information on her family history; a former domestic servant, she now works in the Dublin by Lamplight laundry, a Protestant-run laundry, and as Marian Eide explains, one of the Magdalene laundries housing retired prostitutes (Eide 2011: 57–58). The opening sentence of the story mentions Maria's expectations of a pleasant evening: "The matron had given her leave to go out as the women's tea was over and Maria looked forward to her evening out" (1993: 123). It is Halloween, and Maria, who rarely goes out, is going to visit the family of Joe Donnelly, one of the two brothers she used to take care of when they were boys. The text even reveals Joe had repeatedly invited Maria to live with his family, "but she would have felt herself in the way" (1993: 124). She thus cannot wait to spend the evening with Joe, Joe's wife and their four children, only hoping that "Joe wouldn't come in drunk" (1993: 124), hinting on alcoholism, one of the problems referred to in several stories in *Dubliners*.

Maria also regrets that Joe and his brother Alphy no longer speak to each other; it is because of an unspecified break-up in the family that she had to get the job at the laundry. Reflecting the distrust between the two Christian denominations, Maria never imagined working with Protestants; however, as she needs a job and a place to live, she appears rather satisfied: "She used to have such a bad opinion of Protestants but now she thought they were very nice people, a little quiet and serious, but still very nice people to live with" (1993: 124). Being of peaceful nature, Maria even believes everyone at the laundry is "so fond of [her]" (1993: 123). In appearance, she is rather short and thus somewhat inconspicuous: "Maria was a very, very small person indeed" (1993: 123). Claudine Raynaud

suggests "Maria's small stature likens her to a child or to Alice in Wonderland" (2016). Her body shape may symbolize her inadequacy in certain situations.

On the way from work, Maria stops to buy cakes for the Halloween gathering. As she takes a long time to choose the plumcake at a shop in Henry Street, the young lady by the counter asks her "was it wedding-cake she wanted to buy" (1993: 127), making her blush. The scene is a variation on an earlier situation at tea in the laundry, when one of the women, Lizzie Fleming, said that Maria was going to find a ring in her barmbrack, referring to the Irish tradition of putting objects that are supposed to predict the future into a yeast bread: "Though Fleming had said that for so many Hallow Eves, Maria had to laugh and say she didn't want any ring or man either; and when she laughed her grey-green eyes sparkled with disappointed shyness and the tip of her nose nearly met the tip of her chin" (1993: 125). While Maria may think people like her, they are rather condescending of her. Raynaud proposes that "Maria laughs when she is most ill at ease. Her laughter is the symptom of her embarrassment: it translates her discomfort with conformity as a cover up for sexuality" (2016). Maria thus uses laughter to cope with situations she is not comfortable with.

On the tram to Drumcondra, a drunk elderly man makes room for Maria and tries to talk to her. While she says very little to him, she does not find his attention unpleasant: "Maria thought he was a colonel-looking gentleman and she reflected how much more polite he was than the young men who simply stared straight before them. [...] How easy it was to know a gentleman even when he has a drop taken" (1993: 128). While Maria recognizes the man is not sober, she still idealizes him as a colonel, a representative of the upper class. It is only when she arrives at Joe's house that she is embarrassed to find out she left the plumcake on the tram, as she had been too distracted by the unexpected conversation with the old man.

Still, being in the company of the Donnellys and their neighbours' two daughters, Maria enjoys reminiscing about the old times and when the children ask her to, she agrees to participate in a traditional game which is supposed to reveal the players' future. Maria is thus blindfolded and has to choose one of the objects put in saucers in front of her. While one of the objects is a wedding ring, signifying marriage, Maria selects what is implied to be a lump of clay, as the word clay is only used in the title of the story, never in the text itself: "[Maria] felt a soft wet substance with her fingers and was surprised that nobody spoke or took off her bandage. There was a pause for a few seconds; and then a great deal of scuffling and whispering. Somebody said something about the garden, and at last Mrs Donnelly said something very cross to one of the next-door girls" (1993: 131). As one of the neighbours' girls had replaced clay with water, the text features, in Thomas S. Staley's words, "the death for life substitute" (2017: 67); Vivian Heller even suggests that "in all innocence, Maria chooses death over life" (1995: 20). Although Mrs Donnelly quickly makes the girl put the clay away and asks Maria to draw again, the scene is telling in showing how Maria is often mistreated without realizing it. Maria does not recognize that she has been the target of a cruel joke; as Marilyn French proposes, the story highlights Maria's self-deception, her way of thinking that "blots out or sugars over reality" (1978: 460). Margot Norris makes a connection between garden dirt, mentioned directly in the text, and

excrement, arguing that "what Maria fears is not the touch of excrement on her fingers, but the recognition that her only 'family' – like the rest of the world – treats her 'like shit'" (2003: 153). When Maria draws again, she chooses the prayer book, signifying her spiritual dedication, and implying there will be no significant change in her solitary life.

The prediction seems confirmed by the ending of the story. Before the children go to bed, Maria sings the aria "I Dreamt I Dwelt in Marble Halls" from the Romantic opera *The Bohemian Girl* (1843) by Michael Balfe. While she only sings the first stanza two times, completely omitting the second stanza, no one corrects her. As the second stanza starts with the line "I dreamt that suitors sought my hand," Maria prefers not to think of men in her life and the Donnellys do not try to change that; as Michael F. Davis notes, "no one points out the mistake, the omission, the repression" (2021: 285). While Joe is moved to tears by Maria's singing, as it makes him yearn for the sentimentalized notion of the past, Benjamin Boysen concludes that Maria's "unconsummated existence repeats itself symbolically in the absence of verse lines, which mirrors her own absence from life itself" (2008: 155). The story is thus rather uneventful, focusing on Maria's lack of acknowledgement of her own unfulfilled life; yet, at least in the final scene, Joe treats her with sympathy rather than condescension.

While scholars such as Margot Norris read the story as concentrating on "one of the least significant members of [the] urban mass" and her "desire for recognition and prestige" (2003: 140–141), allegorical interpretations of the text have been common since the 1950s. Two of these have been proposed by Marvin Magalaner, who sees Maria as Virgin Mary due to her name and seemingly virginal status as well as a witch because of the pattern of the Halloween motifs in the text and Maria's peculiar description of the tip of her nose nearly meeting the tip of her chin whenever she laughs (1953). More recently, Michael F. Davis has revised the former symbolic interpretation by putting it within the sociohistorical context, reading the story as a "vituperative parody of the Virgin Mary and [...] a scathing satire of Irish purity culture" (2021: 255). Maria is thus a sexually repressed victim of social propriety dictated by Irish Catholic society. [4]

Michèle Forbes' rewriting of the story makes significant changes to Joyce's text in terms of its characters as well as spatial and temporal setting, so that Joyce's original opening sentence quoted at its beginning only serves as a reminder of the original text. Forbes' proper opening sentence "It was a fat person's thing, but he was only ever aware of doing it after he had done it" (2014: 119), referring to tugging one's T-shirt down, reveals the protagonist, who lives on the outskirts of Dublin after the financial crash of 2008, is not a tiny woman but an overweight man. As Éilís Ní Dhuibhne notes, "fashions in weight were different a hundred years ago, when being too thin suggested illness, as obesity does today" (2015: 149). Forbes' protagonist's, Conor's, unease stemming from his body shape highlights that in the early twenty-first century visual culture, not only women but also men increasingly concern themselves with their appearance. Yet another difference between Joyce's and Forbes' characters is in their ages, as Maria is considerably older than Conor. Still, both seem similarly solitary, having little social life. While Joyce does not mention any of Maria's family members, at the age of

twenty-six, Conor lives with his mother, while his younger brother Oscar has a job in Boston (2014: 119). Conor works as an administrative assistant at a Polish-run company, a job he accepted only out of necessity. Like Maria, Connor does not have a partner and tries to make himself believe that the "people at work liked Conor, they all said they were very fond of him" (2014: 121).

Unlike Maria, who is excited to have some company on Halloween, Conor is planning on a quiet evening on his own: "The house would be empty, he hoped, as his mother said she'd be out visiting friends" (2014: 121). Although Conor later gets a Facebook message from a friend named Dave, asking him to meet at Temple Bar, he decides to stay at home, thinking "Dave liked to push things too far with the drink" (2014: 125). Alcoholism thus remains a problem in Ireland in 2014 just like a century ago. Yet, despite the protagonist's staying at home, the text echoes several situations from Joyce's story, if in a slightly different order. On the tram home, Conor has a friendly conversation with a young boy with glazed eyes, which makes him think "how easy it was to talk to a teenager even when he was high on something" (2014: 123), reminding the reader of Maria's encounter with the inebriated elderly man. Later, Conor stops in the local supermarket to buy "two two-litre bottles of Diet Coke and two bags of fun-sized Mars bars," and thinking of his mother when seeing "a two-for-one offer on the chocolate Swiss rolls" (2014: 124–5), he gets two as well. As Conor is not buying the items for any special occasion like Maria, he indulges in excessive consumption of sweets to compensate for his loneliness.

As a product of the early twenty-first century, Forbes' text turns out to be considerably more explicit regarding sexuality than Joyce's. At home, Conor, who produces movies in his free time and dreams of becoming a filmmaker, is shocked to find out he had not saved the last version of his current project, probably because he was too distracted by a brief private Facebook message from an attractive young woman he had known at college: "How sexy she'd looked in the photo and how surprised he was that she'd sent it to him as a private message, and then he'd wondered if she'd really sent it to him or had someone else, pretending to be her, sent it instead" (2014: 126). Like Maria, Conor enjoys the attention of the other sex; while she tends to aggrandize her interaction with men, he may be somewhat sceptical about women being honestly interested in him, yet he is also easily thrown off balance by any communication with them.

Right after the discovery of the unsaved file, Conor's doorbell rings, as a group of five teenage girls wearing little clothes and heavy make-up stop by his house when trick or treating. One of them is wearing devil's shiny red horns on her head and asks "wasn't his brother Oscar Mannon from Newpark and didn't he go out with her oldest cousin and hadn't her cousin thought Oscar was real good looking," to which another one reacts by saying "it obviously ran in the family – good looks – because [Conor] wasn't such a bad looker himself" (2014: 127). Conor is blushing and promises to give the girls a Halloween treat if they sing something first. In turn, the smallest one starts to sing a contemporaneous song:

C'mon baby make my dreams come true
Work me, big boy, do that thing you do

> *Give me hell, smack me up real good*
> *You know I want it bad, I know you want it too*. (2014: 127, italics in original)

Knowing the lyrics, Conor joins in, making the girl suddenly stop and ending up finishing the song by himself, "his voice gallant and quavering" (2014: 128). Conor's performance of the sexually explicit song is a grotesque inversion of Maria's Romantic aria in Joyce's text. Yet, despite his nervousness, Conor does not find the situation embarrassing until the girls notice a "sticky brown substance" (2014: 128) on his shoes from his walk home from the Luas train stop in Cherrywood, an area of land that temporarily stopped to develop after the property crash. While Conor says it is clay, one of the girls insists "it looks like shit," and the story ends with the girls leaving and Conor overhearing them describing him as "*sooo creepy*" (2014: 128, italics in original).

This passage does not present the only use of the word clay in the text, as it first occurs in the description of the spatial setting, referring to the industrial wasteland on the outside of Dublin: "Rumours of an IKEA coming, [Conor's mother] said, or something else new, well that'd be nice, better than that godforsaken stretch of sodden clay" (2014: 124). As Michael Kane observes, "the abrupt directness and mechanical formulaic language of the briefest flirtation via social media together with the sexual explicitness of the young girls' performance at the end appear as further evidence of the affinity between the degradation of the cultural environment and the muckiness of the physical landscape" (2019: 25). Kane also highlights that by means of their appearance and song, the girls "are playing – imitating – *American* Halloween rather than the Irish version" (2019: 23, italics in original). Accordingly, there are no references to Irish cultural traditions or Catholicism in the text. The story thus highlights Conor's isolation at a time of impersonal online communication and global capitalism, in the context of relaxed social mores and consumer society. While no prediction of Conor's future is included in Forbes' text, the ending is perhaps even sadder than in Joyce's story, which closes with Joe being honestly moved by Maria's singing. In contrast, Conor's performance makes him an object of ridicule from the girls' perspective. Accordingly, in a review of *Dubliners 100*, Valerie O'Riordan praises Forbes' story, finding it "perfect in its narrowness: in a single journey, we get the entirety of a sad life so succinctly that we reckon Aristotle himself would be pleased" (2019). Indeed, Forbes' story is telling in its brevity.

"A Painful Case:" Recontextualizing the homosexual panic

While Joyce's "Clay" does not present an overly dramatic story, "A Painful Case," the story it is followed by in *Dubliners*, has been compared to "an adultery narrative, on the order of the great nineteenth-century classics *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina*," with the difference that the intimacy between a single man and a married woman is "spiritual" rather than physical (Norris 2017: 37). Margot Norris considers this the more surprising as the theme of adultery may be suggested by the story's spatial setting of Chapelizod, the reputed burial place of Iseult of

Ireland, who was supposed to marry King Mark but fell in love with the King's nephew, Tristan (2017: 34). The story's protagonist, a middle-aged bank cashier, is succinctly characterized by the opening sentence: "Mr James Duffy lived in Chapelizod because he wished to live as far as possible from the city of which he was a citizen and because he found all the other suburbs of Dublin mean, modern and pretentious" (1993: 133). Referred to in the text by his surname, Duffy lives a modest and solitary life: "He had neither companions nor friends, church nor creed" (1993: 135). As one of his interests is classical music, especially Mozart, it is at a concert in the Rotunda he happens to meet Mrs Sinico, a married woman slightly younger than himself, accompanied by her daughter. Soon, Duffy and Mrs Sinico start to meet regularly, even in her home; as her husband, who is often away because of his job, no longer thinks of her as particularly physically attractive, he believes Duffy may be interested in the daughter. While there is almost no direct speech of Mrs Sinico in the story, the text suggests she and Duffy talk a lot about music and literature; the opening of the story mentions there is "a complete Wordsworth" (1993: 133) on Duffy's bookshelf. Duffy also confides in her he used to be involved in the Irish Socialist Party, but lost interest after finding out how disunited the party is. At one of their meetings, "Mrs Sinico caught up his hand passionately and pressed it to her cheek" (1993: 139), which surprises Duffy so much that he decides to stop seeing her for good.

While until this point, Duffy's behaviour may be read simply as a refusal to commit adultery, two months after his last conversation with Mrs Sinico, he writes down: "Love between man and man is impossible because there must not be sexual intercourse and friendship between man and woman is impossible because there must be sexual intercourse" (1993: 140). Whereas this note has been largely ignored by previous critics, it has prompted Roberta Jackson's interpretation of Duffy as a closeted gay (1999-2000). Jackson argues that Duffy was looking in Mrs Sinico for a friendly confidant rather than a sexual partner, as evidenced, for example, by the sentence: "With almost maternal solicitude she urged him to let his nature open to the full; she became his confessor" (1993: 137). Thus, when Mrs Sinico presses his hand to her cheek, Duffy takes that for her misunderstanding of his intentions and feels he has no other option than leaving her. As the stories in *Dubliners* were virtually complete by 1905, ten years after Oscar Wilde's trial (Jackson 1999-2000: 88), Jackson summarizes the social context: "If [Duffy] represses his desires, he becomes hopelessly isolated and neurotic, since he will not compromise his ideal of honesty and live with Mrs. Sinico openly, as if he were a heterosexual man. If he acts on his desire for men, then he risks the fate of Wilde and the others whose exploits had been so thoroughly reported in the popular press" (1999-2000: 90). The story thus reflects what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet* calls homosexual panic, "the most private, psychologized form in which many twentieth-century Western men experience their vulnerability to the social pressure of homophobic blackmail," and "one path of control, complementary to public sanctions through the institutions [...] defining and regulating the amorphous territory of 'the sexual'" (1990: 21). The fear of revealing his homosexual orientation and awareness of patriarchal society's expectations of close bonds among men drive Duffy to solitude and anxiety;

moreover, his disappointment with the Irish Socialist Party led him to believe that "no social revolution [...] would be likely to strike Dublin for some centuries" (1993: 138).

In the four following years, Duffy's father dies, but nothing changes in Duffy's monotonous solitary life. Then, one day, when reading the evening paper at his usual dining place in George's Street, a paragraph disconcerts him so much that he can barely finish the meal. It is not until he gets home that the text of the paragraph is revealed, the title being "DEATH OF A LADY AT SYDNEY PARADE," and the subtitle "A PAINFUL CASE" (1993: 140), the same as the name of the story. The paragraph recounts that Mrs Emily Sinico, aged forty-three years, was knocked down by a slow train; her husband mentioned that she had become "rather intemperate in her habits" (1993: 143). While many short stories in *Dubliners* deal, to various extent, with the problem of alcoholism in men, "A Painful Case" touches on this issue in relation to a woman. It is worth noting that, as Conor Reidy writes, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "fears that society was degenerating through hereditary drunkenness brought increasing focus on women as responsible for the destitution and suffering of their children and husbands. Drunken mothers were, therefore, more likely to be detained in prisons and reformatories than their husbands" (2014: 156). After loneliness drove Mrs Sinico to alcoholism, her fear of being imprisoned may thus have led her to commit suicide. While Mrs Sinico had not committed adultery with Duffy, Mónica Galindo-González notes that by going out at night, Emily "could have given the impression of being sexually active;" her suicide could then be seen as motivated by avoiding "a reformatory, or even institutions like the Magdalene laundries" (2025: 17) mentioned in Joyce's story "Clay."

First, Duffy appears rather insensitive to Mrs Sinico's tragedy: "Not merely had she degraded herself; she had degraded him. [...] He had no difficulty now in approving of the course he had taken" (1993: 144). After that he goes to the public-house at Chapelizod Bridge for a drink of hot punch. There are only five or six workingmen "[drinking] at intervals from their huge pint tumblers and [smoking], spitting often on the floor and sometimes dragging the sawdust over their spits with their heavy boots" (1993: 145). Their extreme physicality thus starkly contrasts with Duffy's musings on life and death. Later, walking on his own through the park he used to walk in with Mrs Sinico, he realizes how lonely she must have felt and starts to think: "Why had he withheld life from her? Why had he sentenced her to death? He felt his moral nature falling to pieces" (1993: 146). Not only does he thus regret his decision to stop all contact with her, but he also feels guilty of her death. In the final scene, he would love to hear her voice again, but he is alone, and the night is perfectly silent.

Norris connects the ending to the allusion to Gerhart Hauptmann's play *Michael Kramer* (1900), a "manuscript translation" (1993: 134) of which is said to be on Duffy's desk: "[*Michael Kramer* is] a play about a young loner driven to suicide by his stern father, an unresponsive woman, and contemptuous louts in a tavern. This reading appears to give Duffy a premonition of his future, although in his life he will play the role of the insensitive father to Mrs. Sinico, without recognizing until the end his role in her probable suicide" (Norris 2017: 35–36).

Jackson incorporates Duffy's interest in Mozart, Hauptmann, Nietzsche and German culture in general into her interpretation (1999-2003: 93) by drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's observation in *Tendencies* (1993) that "virtually all of the competing, conflicting figures for understanding same-sex desire [...] were coined and circulated in this period in the first place in German, and through German culture, medicine, and politics."

The opening sentence of Joyce's story fits equally well into Paul Murray's rewriting, as his protagonist also lives a solitary life in Chapelizod. Like Joyce's Duffy, Murray's "lived without companions or friends, just like he lived without religion and politics" (2014: 132). Like Joyce's Duffy, Murray's likes music, although he prefers "the US hardcore of the 1980s, Fugazi, Soulside, Minor Threat" (2014: 132–33), *A Painful Case* being also the name of the third album of the fictional American band Maximum Outrage (2014: 144). Another brief reference to Joyce's text is the information that one of the Maximum Outrage band members was "murdered on the street by a crack addict in Sinico, NJ" (2014: 133). In fact, the band's singer's ascetic life after his bandmate's tragic death inspires Duffy to live in the same way. While the singer, Maxtone, even motivated Duffy to start his own hardcore band, the group soon disbanded, as Duffy did not approve of their lifestyle: "all James' bandmates wanted to do was get wrecked and score the brace-faced teenage girls that hung around after the show" (2014: 134). As Maxtone claims he "gave up drugs, alcohol, television, every dumbfuck stupefacient society hands out to keep us narcotised" (2014: 133), James tries to follow his example; probably the most striking element of James' asceticism is his avoidance of sexual intercourse. Rather than surrendering to pleasure, James aims to become as fit and physically strong as possible, again following the example of Maxtone, whose tattoos include "stern commandments from Sun Tzu and Nietzsche" (2014: 133), Sun Tzu being the author of *The Art of War*, a Classical Chinese text on military strategy. In the world of mass media and online communication, James ironically knows the details of his favourite singer's personal life while remaining isolated from the people living near him. In an interview with Gillian Moore, Murray relates James' purist obsessiveness to a post-Celtic Tiger Ireland characterized by disgust at 1990s excesses and considers how this indicates a specifically gendered form of power: "a classic man thing, having a 'serious' mission or field" (2019: 121). Murray thus sets his story in the same period of time as Forbes.

While Joyce's Duffy, in his own words, leaves his thoughts to himself, refusing to share them with "an obtuse middle class which entrusted its morality to policemen and its fine arts to impresarios" (1993: 138), Murray's Duffy is a famous restaurant critic who posts his scathing reviews online. Although he had started as a music critic, his restaurant reviews criticizing the "temples of pleasure" for their "excess and self-congratulation" (2014: 132) get many more hits. When not reviewing, he is on a low-carb diet, spending his time at the gym or running in Phoenix Park. Accordingly, his editor describes James as an ascetic sort: "[H]e said he could imagine James in medieval times walled up in a draughty monastery, going blind over a page of illuminated manuscript" (2014: 132). Yet, as Gillian Moore observes, "Duffy's imposing, individualistic desires [...] leave him in an unlivable state of purity, a personal and aesthetic paralysis that is finally

deeply unoriginal, for he endlessly repeats the ideas handed to him by music, incel theory, and web analytics" (2019: 122). Therefore, there seems to be no deeper meaning in any aspect of James' life.

One day, his editor tells James about a restaurant run by an order of monks who have taken a vow of silence and are trying to raise money to repair their belltower. James is first distrustful of the simplicity of the place with only one meal on offer per day but then is surprised by the quality so that he writes an unusually positive review. The rest of the story focuses on James's communication with a monk named Bill who works as a server at the restaurant. As Kimberly J. Devlin observes, "Mrs. Sinico, who is figuratively (almost) silenced throughout the original, by both Mr. Duffy's egotism and the biased narrative point of view, is replaced appropriately with a monk named Bill, who has taken – literally – the vow of silence" (2015). Bill's decision not to speak thus presents an intensification of one-sided silence in Joyce's story.

Meeting Bill seems to lead James to rethink his life. Wondering about the point of his job and meaning of his solitary existence, he starts to idealize Bill whom he associates with peace and harmony: "[I]t seemed he could imagine the God that Bill believed in; and with that thought came a new and unknown peace" (2014: 141). James thus turns away from the nihilism of his former model, the singer who screams in one of his songs *"God is dead/ and I envy him"* (2014: 139, italics in original). Barbara Poważa-Kurko praises the story, seeing it as "the only one [in *Dubliners 100*] to consider the metaphysical yearnings of modern man" (2019: 141). Yet, James tends to idealize Bill too much. Wondering "if only he could show [his readers] what Bill had shown him" (2014: 142), he invites Bill for dinner in a restaurant in the centre of Dublin and Bill accepts the invitation. After James confides in Bill with his doubts about his lonely life, Bill, to his shock, "[leans] over to kiss him" (2014: 147), saying he has been lonely too. James reacts by hitting Bill and saying he never wants to see him again. The situation exemplifies what Eric Savoy calls two "different kinds of anxiety" in relation to Kosofsky-Sedgwick's concept of homosexual panic, namely "the gay man's panic over what *is* proscribed and the heterosexual man's fear about what might *potentially* be misconstrued" (1992: 15, italics in original). While Savoy's analysis focuses on texts by late nineteenth century writers, it applies here as well; homosexual panic persists in the early twenty-first century, as Bill is revealed to be a closeted gay and James is afraid of any association with homosexuality. Even the fact that same-sex couples in Ireland were granted the right to civil partnerships in 2010 and same-sex marriages in November 2015 (Citizens Information 2025), about four years before and a year after the publication of *Dubliners 100* respectively, does not mean the end to homophobia in society.

Disappointed by the discovery that Bill is not as perfect as he seemed, James condemns him: "Bill's whole life was a lie. He knew what he was, but he didn't have the courage to admit it; he had spent his days on the run from himself, hiding out like a common criminal" (2014: 149). Rather than changing his personal or professional life, James goes back to his old ways. Eventually, some restaurants announce they will not serve him, so James' editor proposes the newspaper could get some publicity by sending James on holiday to Benidorm, Spain. For James,

the stay turns out to be a disaster, as he is disgusted by people thoughtlessly enjoying their lives to the fullest: “He experienced a hunger, a literal, physical hunger for a single word not slurred with alcohol or ignorance or obscenity” (2014: 150). Spanish holiday resorts thus symbolize consumer culture even more than the opulent restaurants of Dublin.

On the plane home, James picks up the newspaper and finds a story about an Irish monk who had committed suicide by hanging himself from the rope of a recently restored bell tower: “The story came to him in fragments. Middle-aged man, struggle with alcoholism, statement from the abbott, restaurant now closed. Ex-wife, three children” (2014: 150). Like Joyce’s Mrs Sinico, Bill turned to alcohol at some point of his life; besides, he first entered a heterosexual marriage and then became a monk to avoid the necessity of accepting his true identity. Yet, arguing for the inclusion of openly gay priests in the Catholic Church, Kevin Egan emphasizes that “a priest’s ability to live a healthy and committed celibate lifestyle will largely depend on how well he is able to accept and feel good about his sexual orientation” (2016: 661). Being a monk thus could not have worked well for Bill, as he only chose the profession to repress his sexual orientation. Bill’s case illustrates that the intersection of a male religious vocation with repressed homosexuality often creates a profound internal conflict. Only the most recent developments after the publication of *Dubliners 100* suggest that openly gay men will be able to become priests within the Roman Catholic Church.[5]

The final scene of the story shows James as desperate about Bill’s death as Joyce’s Duffy is about the death of Mrs Sinico. As Keith Hopper sums up, Murray “wisely keeps the satirical conceit in check, and leaves the reader with a poignant epiphany of culpability and loss” (2014: 19). By keeping the main storyline, but focusing on two male characters, Murray made the themes of masculinity and homosexuality more explicit. As in Murray’s rewriting the character who dies to suicide is a closeted gay man, the societal rejection of homosexuality is posited at the core of the text even more than in Joyce’s story.

Conclusions

The rewritings of James Joyce’s stories “Clay” and “A Painful Case” from *Dubliners* by Michèle Forbes and Paul Murray respectively update the original texts by setting them in the early twenty-first century, in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland after the 2008 global financial crisis. Both rewritings are rather faithful to the original storylines but change the sociocultural references as well as gender and occupation of several of the solitary characters of the source texts.

Forbes changes the protagonist from Maria, a middle-aged Catholic who works in a Protestant laundry, to Conor, an overweight young man who is an administrator. Like Joyce’s “Clay,” the rewriting is set on Halloween; however, while Maria spends the evening with the family of Joe, a man she used to take care of as a child, Conor stays in on Halloween, communicating with his peers online, and only accidentally happens to be visited by a group of teenage girls trick or treating. Despite spending her life in voluntary isolation, at least in the final scene,

Maria is treated with sympathy, as Joe appears honestly moved by her singing an aria from a Romantic opera; in contrast, Conor becomes an object of ridicule for the girls when he recites the sexually explicit lyrics of a contemporaneous song at the end of the story. While Joyce's story mentions Irish Halloween traditions, Forbes' rewriting reflects the current Americanisation of Halloween celebrations.

Murray changes the solitary protagonist's, James Duffy's, job from a banker to a restaurant critic who posts his reviews online, and even more substantially, he replaces the other major character, the married Mrs Sinico, with a monk named Bill. Both Joyce's and Murray's stories may be seen as commentaries on the society's lack of acceptance of homosexuality. In early twentieth century Ireland, Joyce's Duffy has neither the freedom to be openly gay nor the dishonesty to pretend he is heterosexual, breaking all ties with Mrs Sinico. A century later, Bill also tries to repress his homosexuality, first by marrying a woman and having a family, then by becoming a monk. The revelation of Bill's sexual orientation shocks James who rejects him, as he had idealized the monk for dedicating his life to God. Keeping Joyce's storyline while replacing Mrs Sinico with Bill means that the character who dies to suicide in Murray's rewriting is a closeted gay man, and therefore the societal rejection of homosexuality is posited at the core of the text.

Both rewritings criticize diverse aspects of consumer culture of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, such as the Americanisation of Halloween celebrations and the spread of luxurious restaurants in Dublin, as well as impersonal online communication. Unlike Joyce's stories, neither of the rewritings is limited only to Irish characters or setting, as Conor works in a Polish run company and James goes on a holiday to Spain, highlighting the recent immigration to Ireland as well as travelling across Europe becoming rather common in the last decades. As products of its time, both rewritings are more sexually explicit than their source texts; yet, while Forbes' story suggests sexuality is not a taboo topic in random conversations or popular song lyrics, Murray's story emphasizes homosexuality may still not be easily accepted in early twenty-first century Ireland.

Notes

1 Forbes is a theatre and film actress as well as an author of two novels, *Ghost Moth* (2013) and *Edith & Oliver* (2017).
Murray is an author of four critically acclaimed novels as well as short fiction published in literary journals. Murray's rewriting of "A Painful Case" is the only story in *Dubliners 100* that had been published before, in a slightly different version and under the title "Saint Silence" in the 2011 issue of the literary journal *Five Dials*, accessible online.

2 The phrase comes from the passage where Stephen reflects on midwives and navel cords in "Proteus": "[t]he cords of all link back, strandentwining cable of all flesh" (*U* 3.37).

3 In fact, this is not the first project of its kind, as a similar collection of eleven stories by contemporary Irish writers inspired by Joyce's *Dubliners*, entitled *New Dubliners* and edited by the writer and academic Oona Frawley, was published in 2005. Frawley also contributed to *Dubliners 100* with her rewriting of "The Boarding House."

4 Martha Stallman and Margot Backus even suggest Maria may be an unmarried

mother of Joe; they thus coin the term "maternal misdirection" for presenting out-of-wedlock children to the world as the younger siblings of their biological mothers (2013: 136–37). Moreover, Marian Eide writes that from the mid-nineteenth century on, the name Magdalene, after which the Magdalene laundries, in one of which Maria lives, were called, came to be understood as a euphemism for not only "sex workers," but also "single mothers, or sexually active, unmarried women" (2011: 58).

5 In 2017, the Irish Catholic priest and LGBTQ rights advocate Fr Bernárd Lynch became the first Catholic priest in the world to enter a gay marriage by marrying his husband, Billy Desmond, in County Clare, Ireland (Deegan 2017).
In 2025, the Italian Bishops Conference set out in the document "Guidelines and Norms for Seminaries" that gay men will now be allowed to train as priests within the Roman Catholic Church, provided they commit to celibacy (Creighton Keogh 2025).

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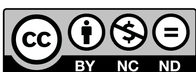

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