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Alena Kolářová

The Irish-Americans Speak For Themselves

The Irish-American Literature and
Two Modern Novels of the Irish-American Family:
Mary Doyle Curran's *The Parish and the Hill* and
Elizabeth Cullinan's *House of Gold*

Vedoucí práce: PhDr. Matthew Sweney, M.A.

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Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že jsem diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně a uvedla v ní předepsaným způsobem všechnu použitou literaturu.

V Olomouci, 30. 11. 2007

*Why do Erin's sons and daughters
Stray to a foreign land?
That is well known to every one –
Bad landlords and dear land...*

-- Irish ballad

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INTRODUCTION

The main subject of this Thesis is the Irish-Americans and their literature. I have been introduced to the Irish-Americans through Kevin Kenny's book *An American Irish: A History* (2000) and become fascinated by the story of their immigration. Being acquainted with the general history, I have soon realized it would be interesting to find out what was the Irish immigrants' response to all the troubles they had to go through, and I discovered there existed a whole body of Irish-American literature that concentrates on this very subject. But, as I also found out, even though the history of the Irish immigration to America and its numerous aspects has filled a great number of volumes, Irish-American literature still has not received a proper attention in the academic field.

The contemporary literary scholars simply seem to be more interested in the more "exotic" African-American, Native-American, Asian-American or Jewish-American literature, and very often omit to include the Irish-American literature into anthologies of ethnic literature. That is not to say that these ethnic literatures do not deserve their attention. But the Irish-Americans, with their culture that has always been so different and specific, compared to the culture of American mainstream and of the other ethnicities, and with the impact they had on the overall development of the USA, should not be ignored. So far, Charles Fanning's *The Irish Voice in America: 250 Years of Irish-American Fiction* (2000) has been the only comprehensive book on its history and development. Even though articles and essays have been published on particular authors or themes, the contributions are still rare. It is, therefore, not surprising

that this specific area of American ethnic literature is not well-known in the Czech academic field. For that reason, I have chosen the theme of my thesis to be the Irish-American literature.

The scope of my thesis is, however, limited by several factors. Firstly, the length of the thesis has made me decide to concentrate only on the work of fiction, although Irish-American poetry and drama are no less important parts of Irish-American literature. Secondly, the discussion will focus only on the part of literature written by the Irish-Americans that deals with the Irish experience in America and will, therefore, exclude writers that are of Irish origin but do not draw the subjects of their writings from their ethnic background (famous writers of Irish origin such as Francis Scott Fitzgerald, Flannery O'Connor or Joyce Carol Oates will not appear). And finally, the emphasis will be put on the works of Irish-American female writers that are largely neglected by the Irish-American literary scholars.

My approach to literary history presented here is based on my belief that the production of any piece of literature mirrors the historical and social situation of its author and that it can, therefore, be perceived as historical evidence of the contemporary experience, sentiments and ways of life at the time of its production. Essentially, the thesis is based on a view Tom Dunn aptly describes in his "Polemical Introduction" to *The Writer as Witness: Literature as Historical Evidence*:

All literary fictions are a form of history [...] However committed the novelist may be to producing a work of the individual imagination [...]

the end product will inevitably be a personal 'history' of the writer's time and place.¹

Although this approach is applicable to virtually all literature, it is, in my opinion, the inherently self-oriented ethnic literature that proves the point the best.

The Irish-American literary production, in particular, includes a large number of portrayals of the public and private lives of the immigrants and their descendants and the recurrent themes appearing in those narrations suggest that these are the actual realities of the ethnic life and can be, therefore, considered actual responses to the historical, social but also literary situation of particular period. My goal here is to present the development of Irish-American fiction in the context of the history of Irish immigration, and through analyses of two novels written by female writers in the second half of the 20th century introduce domestic fiction as one of the thematic groups of Irish-American fiction. This way, I would like to add a new perspective to the already well-described history of the Irish in America.

The first chapter of my thesis discusses, in general, the impact of immigration and ethnicity on the development of American society and culture and, in particular, the specifics of Irish-American ethnic literature. This introduction into the topic is followed by a brief history of the development of the Irish-American literature put into the context of the history of the Irish in America. I am well aware that it would be impossible, even pointless, to present here a comprehensive survey of Irish-American literature, but for the purpose of this work and

¹ Thomas Dunn, "A Polemical Introduction: Literature, Literary Theory and the Historian," *The Writer as Witness: Literature as Historical Evidence* (Cork: Cork University, 1987) 3.

because of the fact this subject is not very well-known in the wider academic field, I considered it necessary to highlight some of the important points of Irish-American literary history.

The last two chapters concentrate on the already mentioned closer discussion of two novels by two Irish-American female writers, namely Mary Doyle Curran's *The Parish and the Hill* (1948) and Elizabeth Cullinan's *House of Gold* (1970), each focusing their novels on the issues forming the Irish-American family.

1. AMERICA, THE LAND OF IMMIGRANTS

“Americans like to think of themselves as a nation of immigrants,” says Gordon Hunter in his introduction to a collection of narratives of the immigrant experience *Immigrant Voices: Twenty-four Narratives on Becoming an American*.² And it is true that many scholars observe that for USA, immigration is the “historic *raison d’être*”,³ that the whole process of colonization of North America and the expansion of the nation has been influenced by the never-ending process of successive waves of immigrants from all over the world.⁴

Although immigration started already in the 17th century,⁵ the massive influx of immigrants from different countries started with the end of Napoleonic Wars in Europe in 1815 and did not end until the ratification of the Immigration Act in 1924.⁶ This nearly hundred-year-old intensive immigration was subject to many changes. The changes in the immigration patterns were extensively influenced by the changing circumstances in Europe and Asia (later also in Latin America and Africa) while the changes in the settlement and occupations the immigrants adopted were based on the changes in the economic and social situation in the United States.⁷

² See Gordon Hunter, Introduction, *Immigrant Voices: Twenty-four Narratives on Becoming an American* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1999) ix.

³ See Maldwyn Allen Jones, *American Immigration*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992) 1.

⁴ See Barbara Roche Rico and Sandra Mano, *American Mosaic: Multicultural Readings in Context* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991) 4.

⁵ For more information on the early settlement and colonization see for example Part I in Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: a History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life* (Harper Perennial, 1991).

⁶ See Daniels 121. The Immigration Act of 1924 was the first federal law that restricted the number of immigrants that could be admitted to the USA from any country to 2% of the amount of any given country’s residents living in the United States in 1890. For more information see M. A. Jones, *American Immigration*, 237.

⁷ See Daniels 122.

Each of the ethnic groups entering the New World brought customs and traditions from their countries of their origin. These all had an impact on their lives in the USA – they influenced their acculturation and integration into the social and cultural milieu of the United States and, in the same way, their cultural, religious, historical and political background enriched American culture and helped to mold the United States to its present-day form. Nevertheless, in a country and nation as large as the USA, the road to acceptance has always been a little rocky. Many of the newly arriving immigrants have met with the prejudice and discrimination emerging out of differences in their race, religion and national background.⁸ The assimilation processes has changed over the time. Ranging from the ideology of “Anglo-conformity” in the time before American independence, through the idea of “melting pot” in the nineteenth century, to this-days theory of “cultural pluralism,” assimilation of the newcomers has always brought about many issues.⁹ The literary production that emerged from the new experience of the ethnics groups, combined with their cultural heritage, played a significant role in shaping of the American literature as a specific body of national literature.

According to Enikő M. Basa, to call a work of American literature ethnic, it must display four major features: 1) it must be about the experience of some ethnic group in America; 2) it

⁸ See Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) 2.

⁹ Gordon defines all three terms: “‘Anglo-conformity’ theory demanded the complete renunciation of the immigrant’s ancestral culture in favor of the behavior and values of the Anglo-Saxon group; the ‘melting pot’ idea envisaged a biological merger of the Anglo-Saxon peoples with other immigrant groups and a blending of their respective cultures into a new indigenous American type; and ‘cultural pluralism’ postulated the preservation of [...] significant portions of the culture of the later immigrant groups within the context of American citizenship and political and economic integration into American society.” Gordon 85.

must be written by members of that group (either by immigrants or by their descendents), 3) in their native language or in English; 4) and it must have an ethnic audience.¹⁰ The exact definition of ethnic literature, however, varies from scholar to scholar, mainly thanks to the fact that the ways of being ethnic also vary so considerably. As Di Pietro and Ifkovic nicely put it: “not everyone is Irish in the same way, or Italian, or Jewish.”¹¹ Labeling any literature ethnic is therefore an uncertain task and faces the danger of falling into stereotypes.

For one scholar, literature is ethnic enough if it uses the ethnic setting as a background for themes more general and universal to all humankind; for another, the ethnic writing must also contain values that are unique to the particular ethnic group in question. Generally, most ethnic literatures spring from the writer’s contact with the dominant society and deals with the experience of an ethnic group’s encounter with the new environment – with the issues of assimilation, with the alienation and isolation, with the political or religious concerns, or with the nostalgic yearning for the country of origin.¹²

Another significant pattern that emerges from the mass of American ethnic literature is the frequent display of generational differences. In many cases, the first generation focuses mainly on the situation in the old country and their reasons for emigration and tries to come to terms with the loss of the old way of life. On the other hand, the second generation primarily treats the subject of the identity problems and the

¹⁰ Enikő Molnár Basa, “Hungarian-American Literature”, *Ethnic Perspectives in American Literature* (New York: MLA, 1983) 90.

¹¹ Robert J. Di Pietro and Edward Ifkovic, Introduction, *Ethnic Perspectives in American Literature* (New York: MLA, 1983) 11.

¹² Di Pietro and Ifkovic 12.

contrasts between the ethnic group and the mainstream.¹³ They also often concentrate on the phenomenon of upward social mobility of the ethnic groups and the striving for respect and recognition.¹⁴

Out of the many ethnic literatures that emerged in North America, Irish-American literature forms one of “the oldest and largest bodies of ethnic writings produced by members and descendents of a single American immigrant group”¹⁵. The Irish-American literature is very specific in comparison to other ethnic literatures as much as the Irish-Americans themselves differ from the other ethnic groups. Compared to other groups, the Irish seem to maintain more of their cultural characteristics. One of the reasons is probably the fact that “their assimilation did not require them to give up their language.”¹⁶ The simple fact that the Irish could speak English when they came to the USA, as it was the official language of the country of their origin, facilitated the early emergence of Irish-American literature. This was proven effective mainly in the period of mass Famine immigration during which the first-hand accounts of the immigrant experience flourished immensely.¹⁷

One of the most distinctive qualities of Irish-American literature is the strong role of Catholicism and the Catholic Church in the production of any piece of Irish-American

¹³ At the beginning of 20th century the term “hyphenated Americans” was made famous by Woodrow Wilson in his 1915 speech in which he claimed that there were Americans who “need[ed] hyphens in their names because only part of them [had] come over”. The term was used as a derogatory symbol of “divided loyalties” and at that time targeted mainly the Irish and German Americans. See Charles Fanning, *Irish Voice in America: 250 Years of Irish-American Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000) 239.

¹⁴ Di Pietro and Ifkovic 11.

¹⁵ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 1.

¹⁶ See Monica McGoldrick, “Irish Families,” *Ethnicity and Family Therapy* (New York & London: The Guildford Press, 1982) 312.

¹⁷ See Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 1.

literature. The Catholic Church was the “primary cultural force and national unifier of the Irish in America.”¹⁸ In Ireland as well as in the USA, Catholicism was an essential source of comfort, a refuge from distressful life. It diminished violence and “provided a hope of salvation, a bond of unity, and a source of identity.”¹⁹ In the USA, however, the Catholic loyalty to Catholic Church was furthermore strengthened by the prosecutions of Anglo-American nativists, the ethnic discrimination, poverty and the overall alienation.²⁰ The Catholic faith and its positive or negative effects on ordinary people is a frequent theme of Irish-American writings. Moreover, most of the Irish-American writers were published by Catholic publishing houses or in Catholic newspapers and magazines.²¹

The last but not least important fact influencing the pattern of Irish-American literature was the strong and extensive Irish literary tradition. The turf-fire storytelling tradition, the satiric social commentaries of Jonathan Swift, the nationalistic poems and songs of Thomas Moore, the Celticism and interest in colorful Irish mythology of William Butler Yeats and the Irish Revival, these all have been projected in the Irish literature on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. At the same time, the Irish-American literature was also shaped by specific traditions of American literature – the most striking example is the American realism and naturalism of Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris, which influenced many realists of the 20th century, notably James T. Farrell.²²

¹⁸ McGoldrick 312.

¹⁹ Lawrence J. McCaffrey, *The Irish Diaspora in America*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1984) 54.

²⁰ See McCaffrey 173.

²¹ See Fanning *The Irish Voice*, mainly Chapters 1, 3, 5.

²² See Fanning *The Irish Voice*, mainly Chapters 1, 3, 5.

2. A BRIEF HISTORY OF IRISH-AMERICAN FICTION²³

The history of Irish-American literature to this day spans nearly three centuries. Since the first Irishmen set foot on the American ground, there has always been someone who chronicled their experience and “changing self-image.”²⁴ Charles Fanning recognizes two cycles of Irish-American literature – two separate but still interconnected entities – the first one in the 19th century, the second one in the 20th century. The first cycle of Irish-American literature consisted of three diverse generations of authors: Irishmen who came before the Great Hunger of the 1840s and excelled in the fields of satire and parody, writers of the Famine generation coming to the USA between 1850 and 1875 who produced didactic, sentimental and practical fiction, and finally the writers of the last third of the 19th century, who were largely concerned with the rise of the Irish into the middle class.²⁵ After an interruption at the beginning of 20th century, the second cycle starts in 1932 with the publication of James T. Farrell’s progressive novel *Young Lonigan: A Boyhood in Chicago Streets*. Farrell’s realistic novel started a century-long wave of Irish-American realistic literature dealing in various forms with the ups and downs of Irish-American everyday experience.²⁶

²³ As there is little material concerned with a more general view on Irish-American literature, my main source in this chapter will be Charles Fanning’s book *The Irish Voice in America: 250 Years of Irish-American Fiction*. Moreover, as the following chapters of this work concentrate on two works of fiction, I have decided to exclude the Irish-American poetry from this survey, although it has a very strong tradition within this body of ethnic literature. For more information on this particular field consult the aforementioned book by Charles Fanning.

²⁴ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 1.

²⁵ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 1.

²⁶ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 3

2.1. Irish-American Literature of the 19th Century

The pre-famine generation of Irish immigrants consisted mainly of Irish Presbyterians coming from the northern provinces of Ulster, the “Ulster Scots”²⁷. These immigrants were mostly skilled workers of higher rank, farmers or indentured servants. They continued to emigrate from Ulster in large numbers till the beginning of the nineteenth century, when they were exceeded by Irish Catholics.²⁸ Except for a number of Irish intellectuals who fled Ireland for political reasons, the majority of Irish Catholics were less solvent and less educated than the mostly Protestant Irish-Americans already established in the USA. Nevertheless, the community contained a large number of educated professionals and well-read intellectuals who formed the audience of the first generation of Irish-American writers.²⁹

The first recognizable pattern of Irish response to American immigration was in the form of satire, whose roots can be traced back to the comic tradition based on a language subversion which is central to the Irish literary tradition. This is the famous ‘Irish bull’ defined as

[A] linguistic self-contradiction, often embedded in digressive anecdote, [...] and aimed at confusing the issue at hand. [...] An act of

²⁷ These immigrants later referred to themselves as Scotch Irish to be distinguished from the Catholic Irish who came in large numbers during the 19th century. They came to Northern Ireland from the Scottish Lowlands in the 17th century during the British colonization of Ireland designed to secure the British rule on the subjugated island. As Presbyterians, they stood on the extreme wing of the Protestant Reformation and were considered dissenters by Anglican Church. They assumed a lower social position under the Anglican class and were their tenants. See Kevin Kenny, *The American Irish: a History* (New York: Pearson Education, 2000) 9-10.

²⁸ Kenny 9, 45.

²⁹ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 9.

violence perpetrated against English, [...] with the goal of destroying meaningful discourse.³⁰

According to David Krause, satire is a natural response to Irish history characterized by British oppression:

In oral and written Irish tradition, language itself, the power of words, is a great weapon, a potent and public act of comic aggression that fortifies one against one's enemies.³¹

From this point of view, the adoption of a satiric tone in Irish-American literature seems to be a natural response to the new 'dangerous' environment of the New World.

The Irish-American writers satirized many aspects of American life, both social and political but also literary³². In addition, the Irish themselves were not spared – many books satirized the stereotypes through which the wider American population perceived the Irish by reproducing them in exaggerated comic version, using the appropriation of Irish negative traits and comic self-satire through playful parody of language and dialects. The works of the first Irish-American literary generation³³ and the response of its audience who

³⁰ See Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 6.

³¹ David Krause, *The Profane Book of Irish Comedy*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982) 34.

³² a good example is the parody of then popular genre of rags-to-riches tales that were made famous mainly by Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*. Popular theme of the satire was the parody of the immigrant's dream of success. See Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 37.

³³ Although many of the satiric writings were published anonymously, a couple of Irish-American writers managed to become novelists by profession. The best examples of writers of this generation are James McHenry and Charles Cannon, both Protestant emigrants from Ulster, who did not follow the satiric tradition as much as their other contemporaries but significantly contributed to the development of the Irish-American literary tradition by adopting specific American historical settings and characters. See Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 43.

appreciated the sophistication of such writings suggest that the Irish-Americans were confident enough to remain “unthreatened by the strange, new American culture in which they found themselves”.³⁴

The next generation of writers was significantly affected by the “Great Hunger”. Since 1845, Ireland was repeatedly struck by potato blight that devastated the potato crop which sustained the Irish people. The problem soon reached catastrophic dimensions and became a major factor for emigration. During the “famine” years, nearly one and half million people died of starvation and famine-related diseases, other two million people emigrated – most of them to the USA.³⁵

The majority of the Irish immigrants in the 19th century were Catholics. Coming to America in great masses, they shared similar experiences and emotions about the immigration. They arrived to a country which was overwhelmingly Anglo-Saxon and Protestant. They all “endured the pain of leaving home, the perils of the voyage by sea, and problems of settlement in the New World”.³⁶ Although mostly from the poor rural areas, the Irish newcomers settled mainly in the cities of the East Coast.³⁷ Being totally unprepared for the urban life, they quickly sank into the social position of an underclass – they were working as common laborers and domestic servants, living in wretched tenement houses, always on the verge of impoverishment and death, with no prospects of any occupational or social mobility.³⁸

³⁴ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 38.

³⁵ Kenny 89.

³⁶ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 74.

³⁷ The mid-nineteen century Irish-Americans concentrated in the cities on the North-East coast, mainly in New York City, Boston or Philadelphia. They have been described as “the urban pioneers”. See Kenny 105.

³⁸ Daniels 136.

This whole complex experience was reflected in the fiction of the famine generation. The circumstances surrounding the immigration and the settlement in the USA facilitated the emergence of the practical and didactic fiction that was intended to help the people in need, “the traumatized refugees.”³⁹ Written by Irish immigrants for a restricted audience of Irish immigrants, the utilitarian novels displayed a fairly predictable pattern based on Catholic traditions – stereotyped characters, moralizing themes, and sentimental and melodramatic plots.⁴⁰ The best example of this generation’s writers is Mary Ann Sadlier, the first prominent Irish-American female writer.⁴¹

Many of the writers of this generation were devoted Catholics and members of the Catholic intellectual elite who advocated conservative Catholic fiction as the only literature that does not threaten morality and as the only possible response to the negative stereotypes of Irish as “ignorant, primitive, unstable, boisterous, indigent, and superstitious”.⁴² Essential for the development of the Irish-American literature in the Famine years, was the establishment of the Catholic publishing houses and newspapers⁴³ which spread the literature from both sides of the Atlantic, thus propagating and

³⁹ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 75.

⁴⁰ According to Fanning, the famine-generation writers wrote these novels with three purposes. They produced a Catholic-tract fiction to encourage the immigrants to keep their faith, an immigrant-guidebook fiction to instruct the newcomers, and a nationalistic-political fiction to support the fight for freedom from British rule in Ireland. See Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 75.

⁴¹ The body of Mary Anne Sadlier’s work contains more than 60 volumes written in a variety of literary modes. Eighteen of her novels concentrate on Irish history and American immigrants and form an essential body of fiction for understanding the experience of the Famine immigrants and the conservative Catholic ideology by which many of them lived. See Fanning, *The Irish Voice* Chapter 4.

⁴² Margaret E. Connors, “Historical and Fictional Stereotypes of the Irish“, *Irish-American Fiction: Essays in Criticism*, ed. D. J. Casey and R. E. Rhodes (New York: AMS Press, 1979) 3.

⁴³ For example the *Pilot*, edited by Patrick Donahoe, became the most influential Irish Catholic journal in America. See Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 77.

consolidating Irish nationalism and the Roman Catholic faith among the Irish-Americans.

The tedious novels of the famine generation of Irish-Americans were in stark contrast to the playful satire of the first generation.⁴⁴ The famine writers addressed the first-hand experience of immigration while facing the strengthening anti-Irish and anti-Catholic sentiments by humorless Catholic tracts and moralizing guidebooks in which they “perpetuated the view of the Irish as humble, obedient laborers and domestics, whose outstanding virtue was their loyalty to the Church”⁴⁵.

A slightly different view appeared a generation later. As the new literary generation coincided with the emergence of the Irish-American middle class, many writers wrote consciously for this “new bourgeoisie,” intentionally portraying educated, successful individuals entering the higher ranks of society.⁴⁶ Similarly to the previous generation, a great number of propagandistic and didactic books were published. This time however, the didactic novels were not “survival manuals” but “etiquette books.” As the Irish-Americans started to climb the social ladder, they needed guidance in acquiring the “virtues of respectability” that were necessary for any advancement in American society.⁴⁷

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Irish-American literature was also influenced by the war of two literary traditions that was raging in the American literary mainstream –

⁴⁴ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 75.

⁴⁵ Connors 4.

⁴⁶ These Irish-Americans were also called the “lace curtain” Irish. Many of them worked as clerks, teachers or sales personnel and benefited from a higher social status. They struggled for acceptance in the American middle-class and did all they could to distance themselves from their poor fellow Irishmen. See Kenny 149.

⁴⁷ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 174.

the war between the genteel romance and the “new realism.” The first supported literature of Christian morality, piety and respectability; the latter simple, natural and honest literature about common people.⁴⁸ Wishing to join the mainstream while maintaining their specific traits, the Irish-American writers were torn between “respectable romanticism and rebellious realism.”⁴⁹ An ambivalent blend of realistic descriptions and characters, and sentimental, implausible plots was a characteristic quality of a large number of works of this generation.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the realistic fiction that would become typical for the 20th century Irish-American literature was slowly proliferating, mainly as a result of the influence of non-Irish realists and naturalists, such as Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris.⁵¹

The best examples of this generation of writers both came from the burgeoning Irish middle-class. Maurice Francis Egan, representing the genteel/sentimental tradition, wrote novels which mirrored the genteel Irish-American middle-class mores. On the other hand, Fineley Peter Dunne, the pioneer of the realistic tradition, chronicled the common life of Chicago working-class immigrants through realistic observations of his comic character of the aging immigrant bartender Mr. Dooley.⁵² Being polar opposites, their writings symbolize the two conflicting lines in Irish-American literature of this generation.

⁴⁸ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 156.

⁴⁹ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 157.

⁵⁰ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 157.

⁵¹ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 176.

⁵² For more information see Fanning, Chapter 6.

2.2. Irish-American Literature of the 20th century

The beginning of the 20th century was according to Charles Fanning characterized by a “cultural amnesia.”⁵³ The immigration rate was decreasing, the social status of Irish-Americans was increasing, and assimilation was becoming much easier. The ethnic experience still existed but writers of this period chose not to draw the subjects of their writings from their cultural background. This loss of Irish-American cultural self-consciousness can be explained by several historical reasons. The outbreak of World War I rekindled the anti-British feelings in Irish-American nationalistic circles, which heightened the negative feelings of the American majority towards the “hyphenated Americans.” Together with the bitter outcome of the Easter Rising and the Irish Revolution, it all contributed to the decline in open Irish-American ethnic affiliation.⁵⁴

The Irish-American realistic tradition, nascent at the end of the 19th century, was also subdued by the Catholic press and publishing houses which continued to advocate the genteel romantic literature which maintained a rather distorted and hypocritical picture of the Irish community. Nor did much support come from the American literary establishment, which encouraged the young writers to reject their own ethnic background as material for their works.⁵⁵

Although “green-tinted”⁵⁶ romantic fiction remained to be published after 1900, the new cycle of Irish-American literature started with James T. Farrell and his *Young Lonigan: A Boyhood in Chicago Streets*. The decline in the ethnic dimension of

⁵³ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 238.

⁵⁴ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 239.

⁵⁵ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 240.

⁵⁶ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 241.

literature was so great that Farrell and his contemporaries had to reinvent Irish-American literature. Their goal was an American fiction which draws on the Irish ethnic materials.⁵⁷

With James T. Farrell, the tradition of realistic fiction entered the mainstream of Irish-American fiction. For the first time, Irish-American realists started to objectively analyze the gains and losses caused by the social rise of the Irish. Farrell's *Young Lonigan* is the best example of such criticism as it targets the social and moral flaws of the Irish-American middle-class community in Chicago. By this time, the Irish-Americans were already established throughout the United States. The Irish communities were not located only on the East Coast but extended as far as the West Coast cities or the Midwest rural areas. A new generation of regional realists appeared. In their works, they drew on regional materials to relate their own stories of the earlier 20th-century Irish-American experience.⁵⁸

In the 1930s and 1940s, autobiography or the autobiographical novel became a frequent genre of Irish-American literature and continued to be very popular throughout the 20th century. As the fiction was getting more personal, even intimate, the recurrent theme of family, including the two important symbols of the powerful dominant matriarch and the sheltering but isolating house, started to be a prominent characteristic of this generation of writers.⁵⁹ To name just few, Brendan Gill, Mary Deasy, and Mary Doyle Curran, all wrote fiction based on their own memories set in

⁵⁷ There still existed Irish-American writers who intentionally chose not to write about the ethnic experience. The most prominent writer is Francis Scott Fitzgerald who avoided his Irish ethnic heritage as much as possible, although many critics find traces of his background throughout the whole bulk of his writing. See Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 241 and 246-250.

⁵⁸ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 292

⁵⁹ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 158

their native Connecticut, Ohio, and Massachusetts, respectively, which focused on the lives of Irish-Americans before the Great Depression.⁶⁰

After World War II, the Irish-American community was fully established in the USA and the immigration dropped down mainly due to immigration law enforcement and the economic prosperity of Ireland.⁶¹ The Irish-Americans climbed even higher up the occupational ladder thanks to the easier opportunity of higher education, accumulated relative wealth, and joined the rest of American higher classes in moving into the suburbs.⁶² In addition, the political power the Irish-Americans held over the municipal urban areas at the beginning of the 20th century expanded well into federal politics.⁶³ Supported also by an academic interest in Irish studies, all this contributed to a new ethnic self-confidence which was reflected in the postwar Irish-American literature.

The Irish-American writers of the second half of the 20th century are numerous and it would be difficult to present here all who address the Irish ethnicity in their works. It is, however, possible to organize their works of fiction into thematic groups derived from the Irish-American social and cultural milieu. These groups are (1) historical novels, (2) novels about the outer world of work, with priests, politicians and policemen as the main characters, (3) domestic novels about family life concentrated around a powerful matriarch and the family house

⁶⁰ See Fanning, *The Irish Voice* Chapter 9

⁶¹ In 1973, the Republic of Ireland joined the European Union and underwent an economic transformation from the focus on agriculture to industry. High economic growth in recent years has led many to call the country the "Celtic Tiger."

⁶² Kenny 227

⁶³ An excellent example is the election of John F. Kennedy to the presidency in 1960. A great-grandson of an Irish famine refugee, JFK was the first and so-far only Catholic president of the USA. See Kenny 243.

and (4) novels written primarily in the modern or postmodern style.⁶⁴ Thomas Flanagan, Edwin O'Connor, Elizabeth Cullinan, and William Kennedy are the best representatives of each of the thematic groups.

Since the end of the 20th century, the Irish-American community has been losing the tight ethnic coherence typical for the decades and centuries before. Irish ghettos do not exist anymore, the Catholic Church is losing its grip on its supporters, and the Irish have successfully assimilated into mainstream America. Nevertheless, an Irish-American experience continues to exist although the Irish-American literary self-consciousness had to be reformulated.⁶⁵ It is mainly the genre of memoirs and autobiographies that has flourished in the past two decades. The young authors have learnt from the previous generation the value of their experience.⁶⁶ Two of the most popular representatives of this genre are Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1995) and Michael Patrick MacDonald's *All Souls: A Family Story from Southie* (1999).

Another significant trend of recent years is the emergence of a strong female voice, such as Maureen Howard, Alice McDermott, and Mary Gordon who continue, if only thematically, in the tradition of domestic fiction, concentrating on everyday life and relationships in Irish-American families.⁶⁷

Although many of the writers of the last generation are great-grandchildren of the Irish immigrants and might have not ever been in the country of their origin, Ireland remains

⁶⁴ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 313.

⁶⁵ See Shaun O'Connell, "That Much Credit: Irish-American Identity and Writing", *The Massachusetts Review* 44.1-2 (2003): 257.

⁶⁶ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 378.

⁶⁷ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 378.

a “source-country”⁶⁸ of their inspiration. Thematically, Ireland provides a set of certain explicit images, places, names, legends, folklore, and customs; stylistically, it offers an implicit style of language, the accents, pace, or rhythm of the speech.⁶⁹

Today, the Irish heritage is for many not something to be proud of but a source of bitterness, a curse any Irish-American carries with him all his life. The last generation of writers tries to “reveal all that has been destructive and redemptive in Irish-American life.”⁷⁰ Whatever the case, whether the writers go back in history or stay in the present, whether their attitudes are positive or negative, their works continue to redefine the Irish-American identity at the turn of 21st century.⁷¹

2.3. Irish-American Female Writers

Considering the number of studies that have been conducted to describe the Irish male migration to United States, it is rather surprising to find out that the majority of Irish immigrants were women.⁷² In the Famine and post-Famine Ireland, women had no realistic chances for marriage or employment. Very often, young women left the rural farms to work as servants, factory workers or shop girls in the cities in

⁶⁸ This phrase was coined by poet Vincent Buckley, the grandson of an Irish immigrant to Australia. It is the “genius loci of ‘a knowledge which goes very deep into the psyche’....The country is a source in the sense that the psyche grows from it and in it [...] Such place, [...] provides an artist with images, history, language manners, myths, ways of perceiving, and ways of communicating.” In his essay, Buckley asks the question where is home for the children of the Irish immigrants and answers that Ireland will always be “imagination’s home” wherever one lives. Quoted in Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 358.

⁶⁹ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 359.

⁷⁰ O’Connell 258.

⁷¹ For detailed information see Fanning, *The Irish Voice* Chapter 11.

⁷² The best source of information on the subject of female immigration so far is Hasia Diner’s *Erin’s Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Uni. Press, 1983) and Janet Nolan’s *Ourselves Alone: Women’s Emigration from Ireland, 1885-1920* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1990).

Ireland, England and later mainly in the USA in order to support their families through remittances and earn their dowry.⁷³ Nevertheless, many of them remained unmarried as their economic independence ended with marriage when they had to assume the role of a homemaker while the husband assumed the role of a provider.⁷⁴ However, in the American urban environment, the Irishwomen had greater opportunity to get steadier and better paid jobs than men, who were relegated to seasonal manual jobs with low wages, and were, therefore, more confident and less threatened by the New World.⁷⁵ Furthermore, the high rate of industrial accidents resulted in a great number of female-headed households, where mothers were responsible for supporting the family.⁷⁶ These factors all led to “general augmentation of female family authority”⁷⁷ and to the emergence of “Irish-American domestic matriarchy,”⁷⁸ a unique phenomenon that influenced the development of the Irish ethnic group and provided the Irish-American literature with a symbol of the strong, powerful mother ruling over the family house that has been prominent in the Irish-American literature for past two centuries.⁷⁹

Although the 19th century Irish women in USA generally gained much larger financial and social autonomy and family authority than they used to have in Ireland,⁸⁰ to penetrate the patriarchal literary circles was hard and complicated. The most prominent literary female figures managed to gain their

⁷³ See Diner 4 and 12.

⁷⁴ See Diner 50.

⁷⁵ See Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 158.

⁷⁶ See Diner 61.

⁷⁷ Diner 46.

⁷⁸ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 158.

⁷⁹ See Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 158-160.

⁸⁰ See Diner, Chapter 3.

positions within the circles as the “hostesses” of the literary salons. This was the case, for example, of Mary Anne Sadlier or poet sisters Alice and Phoebe Cary.⁸¹

The Catholic periodicals also played a significant role in the promotion of 19th-century female writers. Magazines such as the *Boston Pilot*, *New York Tablet*, or the *Catholic World* published works by female writers, and helped writers such as M.A. Sadlier, Katherine Conway and many others to start their careers.⁸² However, their work was published under one condition: that they would support the Christian ideology of morality, piety and respectability. The uncritical praise they received for such fiction, unfortunately, resulted in lower quality of the works produced.⁸³ But although the 19th-century female writers succumbed to the demands of Irish Catholicism, their works still remain an evidence of the contemporary sentiments and ways of life.

The female writers of the 19th-century generation are generally connected with sentimental romantic fiction that virtually served as Catholic moral guidebooks “providing ideal models for conduct”⁸⁴. The books were aimed at the immigrant women and were designed to carry over the message that the only way to succeed in the New World is to remain chaste, modest and faithful to the Catholic creed. The other goal of these books was to preserve the traditional patriarchal picture of a woman as a mother and a wife, as “a spiritual guide,

⁸¹See Patricia Monaghan, “Grandmothers and Rebel Lovers: Archetypes in Irish-American Women’s Poetry”, *MELUS* 18.1 (1993). *JSTOR*. Healey Library, The University of Massachusetts, Boston, USA. 16 Mar. 2006 <<http://www.jstor.org>>.

⁸² See Fanning, *The Irish Voice* Chapters 4 and 5.

⁸³ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 161.

⁸⁴ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 156.

custodian of family's emotional life, and ruler of the home as kingdom and microcosm."⁸⁵

During the 20th century, female writers stayed focused on the domestic life of a family but the 19th-century symbol of the mother gained a new, rather ambivalent, meaning. There was no longer only the saintly, loving, self-sacrificing, keeper of the family hearth who provides the family with safety and happiness, but also the powerful, self-centered, manipulative, dangerous, demanding and overwhelming monster from whose clutches it was necessary to escape.⁸⁶ The symbol of mother was soon joined by the equally powerful and equally ambivalent symbol of a house as both a safe and sheltering refuge and a claustrophobic and isolating cage. The house being the sacred realm where the mother rules, it is not surprising that these two symbols, the mother and house, are very frequent in Irish-American women's fiction. They appear, for example, in Katherine Conway's *Lalor's Maples* (1901), Maureen Howard's *The Bridgeport Bus* (1956), and Elizabeth Cullinan's *House of Gold* (1970).⁸⁷

Altogether, the 20th century yielded a great number of new female voices. A recurrent theme of their works is the everyday life and relationships in Irish-American families and the positive and negative effects of their rise to the middle-class. Very often their works assume the form of autobiography, autobiographical novel or memoir. As Maureen Howard once said:

⁸⁵ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 159.

⁸⁶ See Caledonia Kearns, Introduction, *Cabbage and Bones: An Anthology of Irish-American Women's Fiction* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1997).

⁸⁷ Both symbols will be discussed more closely in one of the following chapters focusing on Elizabeth Cullinan's novel *House of Gold*.

By tradition we are a talky lot [...], and rather taken with speaking our piece whether we are bookish or not. For it is in the telling of our stories that we reveal how bound we are to the rituals of family life, yet how we strain against them.⁸⁸

And it is true that there is a “strong vein of the confessional”⁸⁹ running through many of the works.

Ruth McKenney’s autobiographical short stories, later collected in *My Sister Eileen* (1938), contain light satire of Irish-American middle-class life including the mockery of the author herself. Mary Deasy’s chronicle of a Midwest family *The Hour of Spring* (1948), closely based on her own family experience, on the other hand, discusses the problem of the identity of the third generation of Irish immigrants. Nostalgic reflection on childhood spent at the time of Irish-American transition between working and middle class is then the main theme of Mary Doyle Curran’s *The Parish and the Hill* (1948). And it is not only the nostalgia for the time past that appears in the female writings. Mary Gordon and Elizabeth Cullinan, for example, both assume a rather grave and bitter tone in criticizing the destructive aspects of Irish-American life.⁹⁰

The end of the 20th century also witnessed the emergence of the “postmodern” fiction produced by women writers. The best example is the above-mentioned Maureen Howard. Although her novels draw from her own Irish Catholic upbringing and treat traditional Irish-American themes, her style can be labeled postmodern as it contains “a mélange of

⁸⁸ Maureen Howard, foreword, *Cabbage and Bones: An Anthology of Irish-American Women’s Fiction*, ed. Caledonia Kearns (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1997) xii.

⁸⁹ Howard xiii.

⁹⁰ See Fanning, Chapter 9 and 10.

styles and forms that expresses her impatience with conventional narrative modes.”⁹¹ The novel *Natural History* (1992) is the embodiment of this style. It combines the detective story, psychological study, historical novel and many other genres while employing both conventional narratives and stylized “Joycean technical wizardry”.⁹²

In the 1980s and 1990s, Irish-American women’s literature was influenced by feminism. The main theme of the writings was now the “struggle against patriarchy,”⁹³ and the main characters became strong and powerful yet amiable and feminine women dealing with problems identifiable to all contemporary women. What the writers have in common is, as Sally Barr Ebest concludes in her essay, that:

They decry sexism, alcoholism, violence and abuse. They promote independence yet reiterate the importance of motherhood. They emphasize the strength that comes from family, friends, and community. [...] they point out the church’s weaknesses in dealing with women while they remind us of the need for faith.⁹⁴

To name just a few examples, marital problems are in the center of Alice McDermott’s *Charming Billy* (1998) and Anne Quindlen’s *One True Thing* (1994), the difficulties of coming-of-age in Catholic traditions in the 1960s is the theme of Eileen Myles *Chelsea Girls* (1994).

⁹¹ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 344.

⁹² See Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 364. For more information on Irish-American female writers see Fanning, chapters 10 and 11.

⁹³ Sally Barr Ebest, “These Traits Also Endure: Contemporary Irish and Irish-American Women Writers,” *New Hibernian Review*, (Summer, 2003), 57. *Project Muse*. Healey Library, The University of Massachusetts, Boston, USA. 25 Feb. 2006 <<http://muse.jhu.edu>>.

⁹⁴ Ebest 71.

3. 'SHANTY' vs. 'LACE-CURTAIN': Mary Doyle Curran's *The Parish and the Hill*

Relegated mostly to unskilled menial labor or the domestic service, Irish-American immigrants occupied the bottom of the social ladder for the most of the 19th century. Often encountering persecution and discrimination from the native-born American workers and employers, they had little hope of occupational mobility that would bring them a higher social status. By the 1900s, however, many of the Catholic Irish-Americans moved into the ranks of skilled labor and entered the middle class, leaving the lowest-paid labor to the new immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe.⁹⁵ Moving from the tenement houses of the Irish urban ghettos to the so-far exclusively Protestant middle-class neighborhoods, they had to, and often wanted to, leave behind the lively Irish way of life, including all the traditional customs, and adopt the stiff Protestant values in order to gain acceptance in the “respectable” and “genteel” but not very welcoming middle-class circles. The experience of such struggles to fit in and the accompanying change of values are complex and may cause psychological strain. In a way, it means “both a death and a birth”⁹⁶ of the person’s identity, as he associates himself with a social and economic rather than ethnic group.⁹⁷

As far as Irish-American literature is concerned, it was not until the 1930s that the writers started to deal with the issues connected with the social changes honestly and realistically,

⁹⁵ Lawrence J. McCaffrey, *The Irish Diaspora in America*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1984) 79 and Kenny 186.

⁹⁶ Anne Halley, afterword, *The Parish and the Hill*, by Mary Doyle Curran (1948; New York: The Feminist Press, 1986) 223.

⁹⁷ See Halley 229.

assessing the “price of achieving respectability”.⁹⁸ Being a second generation immigrant herself, Mary Doyle Curran⁹⁹ focused her autobiographical novel *The Parish and the Hill* (1948) on this very issue – the tension of the transition between the old and the new ways of Irish-American experience.

The Parish and the Hill is a series of interconnected memoirs of three generations of an Irish-American Catholic family living in a northeastern mill town, Holyoke, Massachusetts, in the 1920s. Narrated by a little girl, Mary O’Connor, a second generation immigrant, the overall tone is nostalgic, sometimes rather pathetic but honest and sensitive. As if constantly convincing us of the autobiographical nature of the novel, each chapter starts with Mary’s words “I remember,” followed by descriptions of the life in Irish Parish and the members of her family, colorful in style but mostly critical in content.

The chapters are respectively dedicated to people of Irish Parish;¹⁰⁰ Mary’s grandfather, John O’Sullivan, a 19th-century emigrant from Ireland, Co. Kerry; her mother Mame O’Sullivan O’Connor, a sharp-tongued, earthy, God-fearing matriarch; her father James O’Connor, a middle-class hypocrite ashamed by his Irish origin; her mother’s rowdy alcoholic brothers, Great War veterans; her mother’s sisters, cultural renegades who have

⁹⁸ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 178.

⁹⁹ For Mary Doyle Curran’s biography see chapter “About Authors”.

¹⁰⁰ Ellen Somers Horgan defines the parish of the 1920s as “an ecological unit, a community of families and an organized church membership.” The boundaries were defined by the economic level of the families living in the parish. The parish included the church, shops and public schools, and served as “the unit within which the social interaction took place.” See Ellen Somers Horgan, “The American Catholic Irish Family,” *Ethnic Families in America. Patterns and Variations*, 3rd ed. Charles H. Mindel, Robert W. Habenstein (New York: Elsevier, 1988) 57.

become “lace-curtain;” and her two brothers – a vicious bully and a sensitive but bitter intellectual.¹⁰¹

The title of the novel suggests its central conflict: the clash between the working-class and middle-class Irish values, as geographically and also symbolically represented by the “shanty” tenements of Irish Parish and “lace-curtain” Victorian parlors of Money Hole Hill, the conflicts brought about by the phenomenon of class differentiation within an ethnic group of immigrants until that time collectively sharing the bottom step of the social ladder. Anne Halley claims both terms – shanty and lace-curtain – are derogatory:

...to be shanty is to be ignorant and inferior; to be lace-curtain – or become so – means you have initial inferiority that you must hide, or for which you must compensate.¹⁰²

Both terms became relevant only after the acknowledgment of social and economic inequality, when the successful not only started to distance themselves from the less fortunate but also started to think of themselves as superior to the rest. John O’Sullivan, Mary’s grandfather, remembers Ireland and the old Irish Parish and comments on the change:

The Parish itself had nothing of the look of Kerry but the people were the same...there was the same gay look in the eyes of the people and there was love among them...there was no dissension then. You will never see those days again, for they are gone, all of them, the Hill did

¹⁰¹ Catherine Ward, “Wake Homes: Four Modern Novels of the Irish-American Family”, *Éire-Ireland* 26 (1991): 79.

¹⁰² Halley 230.

it, the Hill with its pot of gold and Irishman fighting Irishman to get it.¹⁰³

The allurements of the “pot of gold,”¹⁰⁴ and the concomitant social status were so appealing they eroded the traditional Irish communalism, paving the road for American individualism, and made the Irishmen turn against each other. Those that were working their way into the Yankee society, however, met most frequently with disdain from both the Irish and the Yankees. Mary O’Connor, the narrator, shares this opinion as she perceives these social climbers as “the worst of all, imitators of imitators, neither Yankee nor Irish, but of the species known as the lace-curtain Irish.”¹⁰⁵ In the end, the Yankees were looking down on the lace-curtains, the lace-curtains on the shanties and the shanties did not like both.

According to Halley, the word “shanty” is of Gaelic origin¹⁰⁶ and was used in connection with the lifestyle of poor inhabitants of the rural areas of Ireland who shared one-room, dark and dirty huts “of sod and grass”¹⁰⁷ with extended family and all the livestock the family possessed. The life of immigrants settled in the American industrial cities in cramped, unsanitary, wretched tenements resembled the poor Irish rural life and the meaning was transferred on this particular social group.¹⁰⁸ “Lace-curtain,” on the other hand, originated in a simple fact that the middle-class houses had lace curtains hanging in the

¹⁰³ Curran 49.

¹⁰⁴ Curran 49.

¹⁰⁵ Mary Doyle Curran, *The Parish and the Hill* (New York: the Feminist Press, 1986) 18.

¹⁰⁶ The specific etymology of the word is not known but it may come from the Gaelic phrase “séan teach” meaning “old house”.

¹⁰⁷ Charles Dickens quoted in Halley 230.

¹⁰⁸ Halley 231-232.

windows. At one point, the term was used for the “prosperous, or rich, Irish-American Catholics”¹⁰⁹ not entirely accepted by the upper-class rich Protestant families. More often, however, the term was used to refer to the middle class, struggling to fit in with the American middle class. The best definition of the adjective lace-curtain is by William Shannon:

Lace curtain [...] connotes a self-conscious, anxious attempt to create and maintain a certain level and mode of gentility. [...] [T]he complex of lace-curtain values was epitomized in the cliché “Ssh! What will the neighbors think?”¹¹⁰

In a lace-curtain environment, the neighbors are not an integral part of the community, such as in the shanty parts of town, where each neighbor is a kind of extended-family member tangled in the web of mutual care, but an antagonistic competition that also serves as “a control or potential judge”¹¹¹ of the level of respectability and gentility. The image of crowded tenements implies the sense of immediacy, honesty, and community; lace-curtain, on the other hand, implies separation, secrecy, and individualism.¹¹² The main theme of the novel, then, remains grounded in the contrast between the cordiality and hospitality of shanty Irish and the pretentious hypocrisy and aloofness of lace-curtain Irish.

¹⁰⁹ Halley 231-232.

¹¹⁰ William Shannon, *The American Irish*, quoted in Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 157.

¹¹¹ Halley 232.

¹¹² Halley also suggests that with the beginning of “lace-curtainism,” the referential pronouns “we,” meaning the Irish and Catholic, and “they,” meaning the Yankees and other ethnic groups, acquired a new meaning. For the lace-curtain Irish “we” designated the property owners; the group of “they” moreover included the poor Irish that own nothing. Halley 233.

On the novel's micro-level of family life, this binary opposition is reflected by the characters of the mother and father, each representing one of the social groups and their conflicting values, and their respective realm within the house. For the mother it is the kitchen, "the lived-in room",¹¹³ a traditional gathering place where the actual family and community life took place; for the father, it is the parlor, a place "sacred to the dead"¹¹⁴ where the dead were waked and Yankee friends entertained. Mary is caught between those two worlds:

I remember standing in a doorway with my father pulling me one way and my mother the other. Full of pain and panic, I wondered why neither would cross the threshold. With a clear logic of a child, I realized I could not go both ways.¹¹⁵

To escape this tension, Mary identifies with her grandfather, John O'Sullivan. Although their paths cross in the time when she is "yearning for life" and he is "yearning for death,"¹¹⁶ she intuitively clings to him and looks for comfort in his arms. He passes on to Mary not only the traditional Irish values, including generosity, rejection of meanness and prejudice, and loyalty to the Catholic Church but also the love for the Irish language and the old Irish tradition of story-telling. In Mary's eyes, he represents the mythological Gaelic Ireland, the world of fairies, banshees and the supernatural. Caught between the two worlds of Irish Parish's affectionate frankness and Money Hole Hill's hypocritical pretensions, she chooses him as "the refuge

¹¹³ Curran 3.

¹¹⁴ Curran 2.

¹¹⁵ Curran 95.

¹¹⁶ Curran 20.

then, the symbol now, of [her] existence.”¹¹⁷ He is a lighthouse that guides her through her early life. She identifies with his values and uses them as criteria for evaluating others.¹¹⁸

After his death, Mary turns to her mother as to a “model of active resistance against social and individual evils.”¹¹⁹ Mame O’Sullivan O’Connor represents a positive characterization of an Irish-American matriarch.¹²⁰ Although she has a sharp tongue and independent spirit, she remains loyal to her husband even though he represents a completely opposite world. A real “daughter of the kings of Ireland,”¹²¹ Mame O’Connor embodies “the best qualities of Gaelic Ireland,”¹²² that are, by many, considered the epitome of “shanty.”

Nevertheless, she is caring, generous, honest, religious, compassionate, and tradition-abiding. Most of all, she “doesn’t worry about what the neighbors think.”¹²³ “A mecca for all the unhappy O’Sullivans,”¹²⁴ she cares for her whole family – her father, when he is too weak to do it himself; for her seven brothers, and later her sons any time they get drunk and brings them home with no regards to respectability; for her husband when he is laid off and unable to find a job; for the orphans she often visits; or, for the souls of her less fortunate relatives. She attends every wake in the Irish Parish, as “in her eyes everyone was related to her.”¹²⁵ She believes in the power of candles, holy

¹¹⁷ Curran 20.

¹¹⁸ Bonnie Kime Scott, “Women’s Perspectives in Irish-American Fiction from Betty Smith to Mary McCarthy,” *Irish-American Fiction: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Daniel J. Casey and Robert E. Rhodes (New York: AMS Press, 1979) 95.

¹¹⁹ Halley 238.

¹²⁰ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 299. For more negative view on powerful matriarch see the next chapter on Elizabeth Cullinan’s novel *House of Gold*.

¹²¹ Curran 54.

¹²² Ward 79.

¹²³ Halley 244.

¹²⁴ Curran 152.

¹²⁵ Curran 67.

water, and prayers, even if sometimes to the point that it is comical, and through these performs “a tangible service for the lives and souls of others,”¹²⁶ embracing the “ethic of care” as a form of her interaction with others.¹²⁷

From her father, she inherited a strong dislike of prejudice and, contrary to other Irish-Americans, befriends people of different nationalities and religions, such as Mr. Adelson, a Jewish salesman, and even some of the Yankees.¹²⁸ She is politically active, she votes for Democrats, which is the basis for an ongoing argument with her husband, and believes that women have a right and obligation to do so. Still, despite all her differences, she defends her husband whenever he is criticized and “attempts to hold together a family divided by self-interest, dissipation, and self-destruction,”¹²⁹ thus maintaining a positive picture of a matriarch – courageous and loving, but to a certain extent, still submissive, keeper of the family hearth.

On the other side of the scales is Mary’s father, James O’Connor. Born in Ireland and orphaned in his early age, he was brought up by his American aunt Maggie, who made sure there was nothing Irish left in him. Accepted by the Yankee community as “Irish but very obliging,”¹³⁰ Maggie’s life, and therefore James’s life as well, were always limited by two phrases: “When in Rome do as the Romans do” and “What will the neighbors think?”¹³¹ However understandable James’s hatred for everything Irish is, given his childhood memories of

¹²⁶ Sheila C. Conboy, “Birth and Death: Female Tradition in and the Narrative Voice in Mary Doyle Curran’s *The Parish and the Hill*,” *MELUS* 18 (1991): 67. *JSTOR*. Healey Library, The University of Massachusetts, Boston, USA. 16 Mar. 2006 <<http://www.jstor.org>>.

¹²⁷ Conboy 64.

¹²⁸ See Curran, chapter 3.

¹²⁹ Conboy 64.

¹³⁰ Curran 89.

¹³¹ Curran 90-91.

the starvation, suffering and humiliation he experienced in Ireland, he becomes a cold and stern man with “no sympathy for the Irish people or their imagination.”¹³²

Having no trace of Irish brogue, he passes for a Yankee in the mill hiring office, despite the infamous “No Irishmen need apply”¹³³ policy, and secures a good job, remaining faithful to his employers to the point that he refuses to believe “that the mill would fail him” during the Great Depression lay-offs and declines welfare. Before this unfortunate event, however, still in the time of plenty, he moves his whole family to the poor parts of Money Hole Hill, eagerly trading the boisterous community life of shanty Irish Parish for the more solitary but also more familiar lace-curtain area similar to the one he grew up in. Mary perceives his actions very negatively and she feels that he made them all the “outcasts from [their] own race.”¹³⁴ Nevertheless, he is proud to be a part of the lace-curtain but his struggle for respectability drives him into tyranny. He discourages the people of Irish Parish in his house but welcomes all those of Yankee extraction no matter how boring their visits may be to the others, forcing his children to entertain them. But, no matter how hard he tries, his impact is often diminished by his wife’s conduct who herself, although ultimately loyal and caring, does not always willingly comply and even goes against his will.

Although male characters are portrayed rather harshly, as they are perceived through the “selective lens of the young female narrator”¹³⁵ who judges them according their impact on her mother, it is not only the men who are capable of

¹³² Curran 95.

¹³³ Curran 93.

¹³⁴ Curran 18.

¹³⁵ Conboy 65.

pretensions.¹³⁶ Aunt Maggie, for example, has done everything to remove everything Irish from James's manners. Nevertheless, she remains loyal to the Roman Catholic Church – the quintessence of the Irishness – and travels outside the Protestant town for a Sunday Mass, however “secretly and slyly as though it were sinful,”¹³⁷ ashamed of her religion.

Mame's sisters, Josie and Hannah, are also both described as social climbers. Tempted by money and social status, they erase their heritage and become the “cultural apostate.”¹³⁸ Aunt Josie marries an Irish hardware-store owner and secures “a place among the Irish on Money Hole Hill.”¹³⁹ Achieving respectability “in all its stiffness,” her rare visits at O'Connor's house are “a source of terror” for Mary's mother as well as Mary herself.¹⁴⁰ Imitating the ways of the bourgeoisie, she degrades and ridicules her sister's behavior which she considers shanty in “an overt attempt to advance her own ‘style’.”¹⁴¹ Josie's only daughter Ann quickly picks up the snobbery:

Ann was a refined little girl who never dirtied her dress. [...] I was never allowed to touch any of her things. “Your hands are too dirty,” she would say coldly. [...] I felt exactly as helpless as my mother did before Aunt Josie.¹⁴²

Aunt Josie and Ann both emphasize the outer appearances to the point where they are hard to their own family. Similarly to

¹³⁶ Conboy 65.

¹³⁷ Connor 91.

¹³⁸ Ward 79.

¹³⁹ Curran 143.

¹⁴⁰ Curran 143.

¹⁴¹ Conboy 65.

¹⁴² Curran 145.

her brother in law, Aunt Josie prefers the genteel snobbery of a middle-class women's club to informal and unpretentious community of Irish women.

Mame's second sister, Hannah, is a little different. She too marries by conscious design and with purpose but:

She wait[s] patiently for a Yankee from the Hill, for she would have no Harp "plugging away in the mill for his whole life, sweating to make someone else rich."¹⁴³

Her patience is rewarded and she marries into "the oldest and wealthiest Yankee families on the Hill."¹⁴⁴ Her reward, however, has two sides. Hannah soon finds out the Dickinsons, her husband's family, will never accept her. None of her riches can compensate for the contempt and humiliation she receives from her in-laws "who had relegated her to her 'proper place' the minute she set foot in the door."¹⁴⁵ She is educated to be a proper lady but at the same time constantly reminded of her low Irish origin. When her son is born, he is taken away from her so that he cannot be tainted by her shanty imperfections. At the end, Hannah, full of hatred, takes on the worst of the shanty habits "in a grotesque attempt at revenge"¹⁴⁶:

She thought to shame them by shaming herself. The change took place gradually. At first it was a loose pin in her beautiful hair; soon it was a missing shoelace then mismated shoes – gradually the complete disintegration of her beauty took place.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Curran 151.

¹⁴⁴ Curran 152.

¹⁴⁵ Curran 153.

¹⁴⁶ Ward 82.

¹⁴⁷ Curran 161.

Outliving all of the Dickinson family she hated for so long, she ends up losing her sanity, becoming the tight-fisted “eccentric Mrs. Dickinson”¹⁴⁸ who lives in the chicken coop, guarding all her possessions with the eyes of hawk.

Although some of them are not presented in a very favorable light, most of the female characters are depicted as active women who take at least some control of their lives, if only through the act of choosing a husband. Contrary to that, the male characters are portrayed as passively accepting their fate, which they see as brought down on them by God. This sense of inevitability, of the deserved suffering, stems from the Irish sense of personal guilt embedded in the minds of Irishmen by the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁴⁹ Mary’s uncles, Patrick and Smiley, represent two patterns of self-destructive fatalistic behavior that can be found in Irish-American males.¹⁵⁰ They both degenerate into alcoholism.¹⁵¹ One succumbs to depression and eventually kills himself, the other to violent

¹⁴⁸ Curran 163.

¹⁴⁹ Monica McGoldrick 317.

¹⁵⁰ Halley 235.

¹⁵¹ The Irish inclination for drinking is notorious. The explanation of this phenomenon is, however, still to be found. Kevin Kenny, for example, argues that the stereotype of the “violent Irish drunk” has been imposed by the dominant British and American culture on both sides of Atlantic but admits that drinking might have played a crucial part in the formation of a new ethnic identity. According to him, “public drinking, especially among males, was central to becoming Irish-American.” It was also the expression of manliness, although drinking was not reserved for men only but women as well. Kenny 201.

Hasia Diner presents a corresponding argument. Moreover, she contends that all-male drinking in the saloon also indicated the acceptance of the traditional Irish gender segregation – of the “underlying principles of society that social life and leisure time ought not to be spent with women.” Diner 25.

Lawrence McCaffrey, on the other hand, claims that it was “the Catholic church’s emphasis on sexual puritanism and its tolerance of drinking that encouraged the Irish to seek joy and solace in the bottle.” He elaborates on his argument saying that drinking and the male companionship offered in pubs and saloons “served as partial substitutes for social and sexual relationships with women.” McCaffrey 195.

belligerence and prejudice and dies in a bar fight. Although they both have talents for the noble arts – music, literature and history – the damage caused by World War I, resulting in an inability to return to the former lives, is too severe and they succumbed to drinking. Uncle Patrick, for example, is portrayed as a person who

moved restlessly from job to job unable to keep any. The drinking that he had started in the army continued, and he became in the parlance of the days when heroism was forgotten, “a drunken bum.”¹⁵²

Although alcoholism has been tolerated in Irish culture as “a good man’s weakness,”¹⁵³ it is not so much approved of by James O’Connor and the lace-curtain Irish, who consider all the Sullivan brothers “a disgrace to their race.”¹⁵⁴ As much as Patrick suffers the scorn of the others in silence, Uncle Smiley works off his anger on other people. “Patriot with no country,”¹⁵⁵ his only interest is the history and culture of Ireland. Reciting the nationalistic poetry full of violence and vengeance, he develops “a sense of bitterness and hatred of the prosecutors of a country he had never known”¹⁵⁶ and he picks up not only on those he considers inferior – usually the Poles or Jews, living in the shanty neighborhood – but the Yankees as well.

A similar pattern is repeated in two of Mary’s brothers, Tabby and Eddie. Tabby is a vicious bully, like Uncle Smiley tormenting people in the neighborhood, a violent drunk who

¹⁵² Curran 119.

¹⁵³ McGoldrick 318.

¹⁵⁴ Curran 123.

¹⁵⁵ Curran 131.

¹⁵⁶ Curran 131.

beats and starves his wife and child. “Smart and shrewd”¹⁵⁷ from his early childhood, he becomes the worst of the family social climbers. He finds a good job in Boston, “the stronghold of the lace-curtain Irish,”¹⁵⁸ and makes social connections and enough money but, as Mary remembers, whenever he comes home,

he show[s] [his] father his stuffed wallet to prove [his success]; but no matter how hard things were at home, he never offer[s] a cent.¹⁵⁹

Having no regard for the dismal economic situation of his family, he appropriates the pretentious mores of the middle-class individualism and selfishness. Still, he hates the Yankees, “while he secretly envie[s] them”¹⁶⁰ and this frustrating ambivalent feeling enhances his rage, usually leading to racist prosecution of those he considers inferior.

Eddie, on the other hand, is described as a sensitive and artistic lover of music and literature. Afflicted by infantile paralysis, he is shy and solitary, finding solace in the violin and books. Sort of a family martyr, he cannot go to college, as there is not enough money, and during his father’s lay-offs becomes the only source of financial support for the family – all of this with no complaint or bitterness. His spirit is ultimately broken by his latest job in the city employment office. Seeing a line of miserable men desperate for a job forming in front of his table every day during the Depression, he feels their suffering keenly and becomes, as his friends, “brilliantly negative.”¹⁶¹ Although

¹⁵⁷ Curran 175.

¹⁵⁸ Curran 173.

¹⁵⁹ Curran 173.

¹⁶⁰ Curran 181.

¹⁶¹ Curran 209.

of the same nature as his mother and grandfather, in the end he rejects their legacy of “love and hope”¹⁶² and, in the end, even renounces God. Nevertheless, Eddie remains one of the most important positive influences on Mary’s life. He inspires her to want to read and introduces her to the beauty of written word, encouraging her to write down her thoughts.¹⁶³

It can only be assumed that it was his encouragement that induced Mary to articulate her memories and thus satisfy her desire for “an understandable world order”¹⁶⁴ that she is missing. Through her memories, Mary constructs a specific system of values that takes something from both sides becoming a new Irish-American, different from her mother and father. Mary links her voice with the voices of her past belonging “to the people who shaped her childhood.”¹⁶⁵ She vividly remembers her grandfather’s folk stories and his Gaelic that sounds to her “as pure music.”¹⁶⁶ The first recollection of her mother is her singing voice. Her memories of her brother Eddie are connected with his “voice weaving in and out of the infinity.”¹⁶⁷

The most specific memory of all, however, is the one of the keening, the traditional Irish lament for the dead, she witnessed at the wakes she attended. She remembers one in particular:

That *coainim* was the most elemental cry I have ever heard. Only the wail of a child coming from the womb resembles it. [...] The cry rose and fell with the passion of [women’s] woe. It was the wordless wail of man issuing from the womb of earth, the cry of the wounded, woeful animal. It was the cry of the living clutching, clasping at the departing

¹⁶² Ward 80.

¹⁶³ See Halley 247.

¹⁶⁴ Conboy 66.

¹⁶⁵ Conboy 66.

¹⁶⁶ Curran 21.

¹⁶⁷ Curran 197.

spirit of the dead, begging, beseeching his return. It was the cry of those who knew there would be no coming back.”¹⁶⁸

Figuratively connecting birth and death, Mary transforms the oral tradition of her matrilineage, “resurrecting the living from the dead in [the] warm rich rememberings”¹⁶⁹ of her family, although with a sad realization she cannot bring the living from the dead, or heal the wounded. Her narration serves as a symbolic assuagement of her painful experience, in a way similar to the self-healing folk remedies of her fore-mothers she so colorfully describes in the first chapter.

The last scene of the novel, Mary’s nightmare, reinforces the tendency to read the novel as a sort of symbolic wake for the members of her family and also more generally for the traditional Irish culture dying under the pressure of the newly established Irish-American social system. In her dream, she stands in the cold rain outside the kitchen window and watches her family gathered inside drinking and making an “unbearable” noise while her brother Tabby sings “a horrible, unmelodious song” in a “vicious and violent” spirit.¹⁷⁰ She is the only one who notices her mother and grandfather leaving down “the long, dark hallway.”¹⁷¹ Eddie refuses to join in the merriment and starts to play a song on his violin. Suddenly everything is quiet, only Eddie’s dirge “fills the room with passion of grief” and “the long lamentation of the dead for the living. *Olagon! Olagon! Olagon!*” is the only thing that subconsciously resonates in Mary’s ears.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁸ Curran 70.

¹⁶⁹ Curran 69.

¹⁷⁰ Curran 220.

¹⁷¹ Curran 220.

¹⁷² Curran 221.

The first-generation Irish-American culture, represented by her mother and grandfather, is gone, the new values that are taking over are “debased and vulgar,”¹⁷³ but nobody, except for Mary and Eddie, seems to notice. Reunited in their mourning, Mary and Eddie are actually the only people who might be, through the power of literature and philosophy that broaden their horizons, able to take on

new American identities, which will be different from those of lace-curtain middle-class, and necessarily different from those of their grandfather and mother.¹⁷⁴

It may look as if the novel ends on a solemn, rather pessimistic, note, but its conclusion also contains a thread of hope that Mary O’Connor, Mary Doyle Curran, and ultimately all the next generations of Irish-Americans have a chance to break from the damaging trauma of the Irish immigrant experience.

¹⁷³ Ward 81.

¹⁷⁴ Halley 224.

4. THE MOTHER AND THE HOUSE: Elizabeth Cullinan's *House of Gold*

During the second half of the 20th century, most of the Irish-Americans assimilated with the rest of the American population. After World War II, Irish-Americans also took advantage of the G.I. Bill of Rights¹⁷⁵ which opened the door to higher education and, consequently, to the better-paid skilled jobs. Acquiring more wealth and thus a stable middle-class status, the Irish-Americans started to flee from the urban ghettos to settle in the suburbs with the rest of the middle-class America.¹⁷⁶ As a result of such assimilation, the post-war generations of Irish-Americans started to see themselves less as the 'Irish' Roman Catholics and more as the 'American' Roman Catholics that were advocating the piety, morality and respectability of the middle-class. Although Irishness and Catholicism have been in Irish-American context an inseparable part of the Irish-American ethnicity, in the time of the Irish independence, the main source of psychological identity was no longer the nation (or the country of origin that most of the Irish-Americans had never set foot on) but the smaller unit of family, although its character was molded by specifically Irish and Irish-American tradition and values.¹⁷⁷

The family has always been an important factor in the formation of ethnic identity because ethnic affiliation is

¹⁷⁵ The G.I. Bill was one of the most significant pieces of social legislation of the 20th century. It provided for college and vocational education for returning World War II veterans. It also provided for one year of unemployment compensation and loans for returning veterans to buy homes and start businesses. See George B. Tindall & David E. Shi, *Dějiny Spojených států amerických* (Praha: Lidové noviny, 2000) 632.

¹⁷⁶ See Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 312.

¹⁷⁷ See McCaffrey 173.

primarily “a family affair” and because it “grows from customs and attitudes [...] that are grounded in the family life.”¹⁷⁸ All this has also been reflected in the Irish-American literary production. Fiction about home and families has always been a major part of the Irish-American literary tradition. All the way back to the start, writers have paid attention to the family relations and the virtues and vices of its members that resulted from the immigrant experience. Never had such focus changed during the 20th century. Relatively recent studies in Irish-American family therapy also confirm that the old ways of Irish-American private lives remain nearly the same as they were in 19th century. The typical traits include female dominance in family life, an inability to express emotions, an embrace of guilt and fatalistic acceptance of suffering, and a high incidence of alcoholism.¹⁷⁹ All of these themes have found their way in the novels and short stories of the Irish-American writers, including Elizabeth Cullinan¹⁸⁰ who, in her novel *House of Gold* (1970) focused mainly on the female dominance, the family relations and the tension resulting from repressed emotions.

The plot of the novel centers on Julia Devlin and her six living children, who are called home because ‘Mother’ is dying. The novel takes place somewhere in the New York suburbs, probably in the 1960s. It spans only two hot July days – the day of Mrs. Devlin death and the following day of her wake, but the twelve voices of the Devlin children and their families retell the story of one life of an Irish-American matriarch spent in a “fiercely cherished house from which she vowed never to

¹⁷⁸ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 328.

¹⁷⁹ See McGoldrick 310 – 325.

¹⁸⁰ For Elizabeth’s Cullinan biography see chapter “About Authors”

move.”¹⁸¹ During the whole narration, Mrs. Devlin is unconscious, and eventually dead, but in the conversations and memories of others, she comes alive as a still very much powerful and domineering ruler of a seemingly happy, but very dysfunctional family, living in a revered but oppressive and isolating house.

Essentially, Cullinan’s novel revolves around two conjunct symbols of Irish-American fiction: “the dominant mother who controls a house.”¹⁸² According to Charles Fanning, the persistence with which these two subjects appear in the Irish-American literature suggests that they reflect the actual realities of the Irish-American experience. He observes three notable factors that affected the emergence of the phenomenon of Irish-American domestic matriarchy.¹⁸³

Firstly, it was the gender segregation characteristic for Irish society of the 19th century that played a significant role in this process. In the male-dominated, patriarchal social system, the women were relegated to subservient roles of homemakers while the men played the significant role within the areas concerning the welfare of the family and also within the realm of struggle against the Protestant Ascendancy. Failing in both spheres, unable to provide for their families during the Great Hunger and waging unsuccessful revolutions against their landlords, it was them who had to deal with the stigma of failure and humiliation. Women, on the other hand, still able to meet with the requirements of their traditional roles as mothers, felt

¹⁸¹ Charles Fanning, “Elizabeth Cullinan’s *House of Gold*: Culmination of Irish-American Dream,” *MELUS* 7.4 (1980): 37. *JSTOR*. Healey Library, The University of Massachusetts, Boston, USA. 16 Mar. 2006 <<http://www.jstor.org>>.

¹⁸² Fanning, “Culmination” 31.

¹⁸³ See Fanning, “Culmination” 31.

safe in the private sphere of home and thus retained more confidence than men.¹⁸⁴

The second influential factor in the development of a strong mother figure was the particularity of Irish Catholicism. Although the Irish have always been perceived as strictly religious, it was not until the “devotional revolution”¹⁸⁵ of the second half of the 19th century that the Catholic Church assumed such a strong role in the Irish lives. Up till that time, the Catholic doctrine was observed superficially and was mixed with folk religion and popular superstitions.¹⁸⁶ After the revolution, however, the role of the mother as the traditional moral and religious guide was reinforced by this new emphasis on religion. Moreover, the resulting moral puritanism that praised the virtue of chastity and highlighted the horrors of sexuality, presenting intercourse as a “shameful act and a necessary evil” debased the role of men in child conception but at the same time put women on the pedestal as the self-sacrificing and “dutiful childbearers.”¹⁸⁷

The last factor that facilitated the transfer of the family power lies in the specifics of the immigrant experience. Coming to American cities, most of the Irishmen were from rural areas and inexperienced in any skilled work. The majority of male ended up doing menial, “pick-and-shovel,” jobs, constructing

¹⁸⁴ See Fanning, “Culmination” 32. For more information on women in 19th century Ireland see Diner, chapter 1.

¹⁸⁵ The “devotional revolution” affected both sides of the Atlantic. Led by Cardinal Paul Cullen in Dublin and Archbishop John Hughes in New York, the revolution introduced a series of devotional practices and institutions, including among others pilgrimages, catechism, rosary beads, and devotions to the Sacred Heart and the Virgin Mary, and encouraged attendance at mass and confession. The imposed orthodoxy resulted in the increased number of regularly practicing Catholics. In post-famine Ireland the number jumped from 40% to 90% in fifty years. See Kenny 113 and Fanning, “Culmination” 32.

¹⁸⁶ See Kenny 113.

¹⁸⁷ Fanning, “Culmination” 32. See also Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 158.

railways or digging up canals, at the same time facing the persecutions and discriminations of the hostile natives. Women, on the other hand, were able to find work much easier. As domestic servants, cooks, mill and factory workers, nurses, or even teachers, they very often took up the role of the breadwinner, taking care of either themselves alone¹⁸⁸ or, in the cases of being widows or deserted by their husbands, the whole family. They eventually left the role of breadwinner to their husbands after marriage and assumed the role of a homemaker but this experience reinforced their “sense of self-worth”¹⁸⁹ which resulted in a “general augmentation of female family authority.”¹⁹⁰ Without any active rejection of the traditional cultural values of female subservience and loyalty, women took over the family control, their homes becoming their “refuge and [their] strength.”¹⁹¹

The strong role of the house in the Irish-American cultural tradition is also a result of several factors at work. The first one is grounded in the Irish collective memory. The 19th-century immigrants who experienced the dismal social and economic situation of British dominance and the horrors of the Great Famine brought with them “strong emotions about houses.”¹⁹² Remembering, on one hand, the agonizing realities of evictions and, on the other, the “big house” as a symbol of wealthy but repressive Protestant aristocracy, the possibility of home ownership became very alluring to the Irish in America.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁸ As was already mentioned earlier in the text, more than half of the immigrants from Ireland were women, primarily single women.

¹⁸⁹ Fanning, “Culmination” 32.

¹⁹⁰ Diner 46.

¹⁹¹ Fanning, “Culmination” 33.

¹⁹² Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 159.

¹⁹³ See Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 159.

Lawrence McCaffrey declares a similar reason for such “Irish lust to own property”¹⁹⁴:

To Catholic, peasant immigrants like the Irish, owning property was a symbol of individual freedom and dignity, a natural ambition for people who had been serfs in Europe.¹⁹⁵

The house has always been a symbol of economic security. In the USA, it moreover became a symbol of the social status. In American society, the private dwelling on its plot of land, as compared to the tenement house, signified the immigrant’s success. For the Irish, private property became “a potential ticket to acceptance into the adopted alien society.”¹⁹⁶

On a more intimate level, the house also served as a place of refuge from the dangers and hostility of the new American society. Besides this protective function, the house also “supported and helped to define the family”¹⁹⁷ and, consequently, also supported and helped to define the Irish-American identity. The house being a central immigrant institution, the mother’s dominant position within the family circle became even more so, as the “home was her province entirely.”¹⁹⁸

All these so-far mentioned factors accounted for the almost archetypal recurrence of mothers and houses in the Irish-American fiction since the 19th century. Yet again, it was not until the 1930s that writers started to look at both subjects from a more critical point of view. Although one of the first

¹⁹⁴ McCaffrey 77.

¹⁹⁵ McCaffrey 77.

¹⁹⁶ Fanning, “Culmination” 33.

¹⁹⁷ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 159.

¹⁹⁸ Fanning, “Culmination” 33.

novels revolving around the domineering mother and the central symbol of house, Katherine Conway's *Lalor's Maples* (1901), emerged at the beginning of the 20th century, the first "sustained negative characterization of an Irish-American matriarch" appeared in James T. Farrell's Studs Lonigan trilogy.¹⁹⁹

Continuing in the same tradition, Elizabeth Cullinan presents in her novel "the most incisive examination"²⁰⁰ of the dysfunctional family, criticizing the traditional Irish-American conception of the idealized, saintly mother ruling over the adored family house. The title of the novel, *House of Gold*, reflects these major themes.

On a literal level, the name of the novel refers to the family house. Its interior is decorated with golden touches, such as gold brocade portieres, gold-rimmed glasses, a china set with gold leaves (all relics of Mr. and Mrs. Devlin's fiftieth wedding anniversary), and photographs of golden-haired Devlin babies. The house is presented as a shrine Mrs. Devlin constructed to protect herself and her family.²⁰¹ She filled the place with religious objects – statues and pictures of Jesus, Virgin Mary, the saints, crucifixes and rosaries, but also with "Catholic ritualistic atmosphere"²⁰² through which she exerted her authority over the household.

For Mrs. Devlin, her house was the most important and priceless possession she ever had. She had always been

¹⁹⁹ Fanning, *The Irish Voice* 271. For an analysis of Conway's novel see also chapter 5. The first part of James T. Farrell's trilogy, *Young Studs Lonigan*, was published in 1932, the second part, *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan*, in 1934 and the final part, *Judgment Day*, in 1935.

²⁰⁰ Fanning, "Culmination" 37.

²⁰¹ See Ward 86.

²⁰² Ellen C. Frye, "Elizabeth Cullinan," *Catholic Women Writers: a Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*, ed. Mary R. Reichardt (Westport & London: Greenwood Press, 2001) 77.

ambitious to own her own house and worked hard to get it. In the last days of her life, she still remembered the day she moved there as if it was yesterday:

Finally the long looked for day arrived and just 45 yrs. ago we moved into our own home. [...] I had dreamed of living in the country and at long last my dream came true and we moved to this little house.²⁰³

Although the house is revered by all the Devlins as an almost holy place, the frequent descriptions of its rundown, decrepit interior and exterior reveal the illusiveness of this veneration. It is Edwin Carroll, Mrs. Devlin's son-in-law, who comments on the reality:

It was just a house, he'd had to realize, not a very comfortable house and not a very happy one, either.²⁰⁴

Ward claims that the house also "reflects the family situation" which is also "squalid, crowded and oppressive."²⁰⁵ Indeed, as we learn from the novel, all the Devlin children, even as grown-up adults, reveal the "fears, loneliness, and insecurities"²⁰⁶ that resulted from their mother's control and enforced dependence. As Edwin reflects: "None of her family challenged her view of how things ought to be."²⁰⁷ The only people who are able to see the oppressiveness of the house are the outsiders to the Devlin clan – the spouses and the grandchildren.

²⁰³ Elizabeth Cullinan, *House of Gold* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970) 165.

²⁰⁴ Cullinan 93.

²⁰⁵ Ward 85-86.

²⁰⁶ Frye 76.

²⁰⁷ Cullinan 63.

One by one, they all seek the outside space to relieve the tensions, “to breathe.”²⁰⁸ Clair Devlin, another in-law, reveals her feelings about the house:

The sight of [the house] always gave her a sinking feeling, an apprehensiveness – of what might happen here and of what had happened already.²⁰⁹

Later, she goes on in her contemplations about Mrs. Devlin and her role in the house. She recognizes that

here in the house you always felt the weight of [Mrs. Devlin’s] presence, her overbearing possessiveness. You couldn’t stay here for long without beginning to feel physically oppressed.²¹⁰

None of the Devlin children is capable of such insight. Unable to criticize neither their mother nor the house, the children are imprisoned in their mother’s illusionary version of the world, in the “myth of family specialness,”²¹¹ and in the crushing relationships to each other.

They all believe in the idealized, sacred versions of their mother and the family house as the extension of her. When pondering over the gold-leaf set of china, Clair realizes how “ridiculously out of place” it is in a house like that:

²⁰⁸ Ward 88.

²⁰⁹ Cullinan 107.

²¹⁰ Cullinan 138.

²¹¹ Ward 88.

Royalty might set their tables with something of the sort. And God, of course. There were things like this on His table, the sacred vessels on his altar [...].²¹²

In Julia Devlin's house, simple domestic objects acquire a symbolic meaning. As Clair continues her meditation, symbolic "of her, Mrs. Devlin."²¹³

On this symbolical level, the title points to Mrs. Devlin herself. The phrase "House of Gold," as the novel makes explicit, comes from the "Litany of the Blessed Virgin" and is one of the titles the church uses in reference to Virgin Mary. Living according to strong Catholic beliefs and raising her children in compliance with them, Julia Devlin is the embodiment of the Catholicism that, like Mrs. Devlin, dominates the house. Despite all the complicated relationships she has with her children, she is revered by them as "a saintly Madonna-like figure."²¹⁴ Moreover, she perceives herself as "a specially blessed woman"²¹⁵ who made many sacrifices for the good of her children's welfare. She complacently believes that she will be ultimately rewarded for everything she has done for them:

Surely there was something marvelous in store for a mother who had sacrificed so much.²¹⁶

Mrs. Devlin simply takes pride in her accomplishments.

As Sister Sebastian, a nurse-nun who tends to Mrs. Devlin during her last days, observes, "no story interested Mrs.

²¹² Cullinan 212.

²¹³ Cullinan 213.

²¹⁴ Frye 75.

²¹⁵ Frye 77.

²¹⁶ Cullinan 3.

Devlin so much as her own.”²¹⁷ Her self-content is shown at its best in Mrs. Devlin’s autobiography entitled “The Story of a Mother” which Clair, her daughter-in-law, discovers when she is helping to get the house in order. Prompted by her own daughter to write her life-story, Mrs. Devlin begins:

For [other mothers’] benefit and with God’s help, I will try to set down this Story which when I look back on it seems more like Fiction than Truth.²¹⁸

Although she sees her life story as inspirational for others, it is this manuscript, placed in the center of the novel, which reveals how out of touch with reality Mrs. Devlin has always been. “The Story” can be divided into four parts that deal with Mrs. Devlin’s life before marriage, the accomplishments of her children, the story of her house and her trip to the Philippines where her son was stationed as a missionary.

The first part focuses on Mrs. Devlin’s background – her childhood and early adolescence. Although it is the shortest part of “The Story,” it reveals crucial information on the circumstances that influenced her whole adult life. We learn that, as a little girl, she was taken from England to live with her aunt and uncle in America because her Irish parents were too poor to be able to take care of her and she has never seen her family since. This experience of abandonment and the loneliness and stiffness with which she had to deal in her new home obviously influenced her perception of family, or more generally human relationships. “Starved for love,” she gets married very

²¹⁷ Cullinan 58.

²¹⁸ Cullinan 150.

early to the first man that crosses her path and builds a large family through which she satisfies “her craving for love and adulation.”²¹⁹

But the admiration does not go only one way. As we learn from her narration, she seems to worship her children unconditionally and boundlessly. Altogether she had nine children, the first two sons, Francis and Michael, “God had taken to Himself”²²⁰ in their young adulthood. The next four entered the religious life – two became priests, Father Vincent, who also died young during his mission, and Father Phil, who assumed the role of “family model and leader;”²²¹ and two became nuns, Mother Mary James and Mother Helen Marie. The last three, Elizabeth, Justin, and Tom, started various secular careers.

Although “The Story” portrays each offspring in a rather favorable light, the conversations and retrospective scenes that make up the rest of the novel reveal the relationships in her “happy” and “devoted” family as much more complex and problematic. For example, her description of the religious vocations of her children as entirely their idea, “opposed by her until the sincerity of the vocation shone through to convince her,”²²² contrasts, firstly, with the traditionally high regard for the religious professions of the Irish Catholics²²³ but also with the fact that, as Frank, one of her grandchildren, recalls, Mrs. Devlin “always wanted everybody to be a priest or a nun.”²²⁴

²¹⁹ Ward 86.

²²⁰ Cullinan 3.

²²¹ Ward 87.

²²² Fanning, “Culmination” 39.

²²³ In Irish culture, to have a priest in the family has always been regarded as a great blessing for the family as it brings not only respect of the community but also a certain economic security.

²²⁴ Cullinan 120.

Also, when the narration concentrates on Elizabeth, Mrs. Devlin speaks highly of her musical talents:

When she reached the age of 15 this lovely daughter was besieged by people wanting her to give them Lessons on the Piano. [...] and so it was decided that Elizabeth would begin her musical Career [...] [She] had a very nice clientele up to the time she got married.²²⁵

The important phrase here is “it was decided.” Elizabeth never had a choice. She was denied both the opportunity to enter the religious life, although it is obvious from the novel that she was sincerely interested, but also the opportunity to go to college and get an education. She was simply chosen to be the one who would stay at home and “take care of Mama in her old age.”²²⁶

Another indication of Mrs. Devlin’s sugar-coated and rather distorted perception of her children is the “stylistic unreality”²²⁷ of her descriptions. Francis, her eldest, is portrayed as a great hero whose funeral stopped traffic on the main road and made “grown men [...] [weep] over his coffin”²²⁸ while he is only a member of the local democratic club. Michael, another of her deceased sons, is described as a happy-go-lucky fellow who dies on his travels with the Merchant Marines of “broken heart,” grieving his fiancée who, as it later turns out, died during abortion. Tom, the youngest and “the pet,”²²⁹ is another of Mrs. Devlin’s heroes as he “fought in the thick of the Battles and won many ribbons and service medals for Valor.”²³⁰

²²⁵ Cullinan 162.

²²⁶ Cullinan 76.

²²⁷ Fanning, “Culmination” 39.

²²⁸ Cullinan 153.

²²⁹ Cullinan 163.

²³⁰ Cullinan 164.

The exaltations go on and on. As Clair finishes her reading, she observes that the family story “read like a fairy-tale”:

the clear line and brilliant colors; tragedy and triumph and nothing in between, nothing but the bold sweep of events past all that was day to day or moment to moment, past boredom, irritation, triviality, past doubt and disorder and the effort to understand.²³¹

Mrs. Devlin in her self-centeredness and hypocrisy fails to understand what her strictness and forced compliance eventually resulted in.

Each of the children has been influenced by their mother’s treatment. Tom is arrogant, full of himself and hot-tempered; Mother Helen Marie is rather cold-hearted, very critical and patronizing of her sister Mother Mary James; Father Phil is aloof, self-centered and condescending; Elizabeth is hypocritical and very authoritative towards her family; and Justin is “a middle-aged baby”²³² still living in his mother’s house. As it seems, none of the children, even as adults, is able to escape from the clutches of their mother’s authority and “grow beyond their identity as Devlin children.”²³³ At least no one seems to try. As Clair observes:

The Devlins were always so glad to be together, above all, to be here where they belonged – not that any of them had ventured very far. Not poor Elizabeth who’d taken half a lifetime to go ten minutes away.

²³¹ Cullinan 169.

²³² Eileen Kennedy, “Bequeathing Tokens: Elizabeth Cullinan’s Irish-Americans,” *Éire-Ireland* 16.4 (1981): 95.

²³³ Maureen Murphy, “Elizabeth Cullinan: Yellow and Gold,” *Irish-American Fiction: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Daniel J. Casey and Robert E. Rhodes (New York: AMS Press, 1979) 144.

And certainly not poor Justin. Not the nuns and the priest either. They'd only gone across the street, to the church. Not even Tom. With all his drive and determination – his mother's drive and determination – he'd only traded one closed society for another, this house for the service.²³⁴

The four, who left the household, only exchanged one authoritarian institution for another; the other two simply remained in the house. And it is Elizabeth and Justin who seemed to be damaged the most. But, they are the only children capable of any critical comments on their mother or the house.

The one child that experiences Mrs. Devlin's repressions most forcefully is Elizabeth. Having a family of her own, a husband and two grown-up daughters, she still sees herself as "more a daughter than she was anything else."²³⁵ As the last remaining daughter who had not entered the religious life, she was destined to care for her mother. Becoming a "glorified family servant,"²³⁶ she sacrifices her family welfare to the needs of her mother and spends most of her life cramped with her family in the attic of Mrs. Devlin's house. Otherwise dutiful and obedient to her mother, she acts against her wishes only once, when she moves with her family to a nearby apartment. This revolt, however understandable, does not go unpunished and Elizabeth spends most of her mother's dying day trying to "exorcise the guilt she feels"²³⁷ for abandoning her mother by moving away. She is, moreover, tormented by her inability to give a truthful answer to her mother's last question. When Mrs. Devlin asks if

²³⁴ Cullinan 180.

²³⁵ Cullinan 14.

²³⁶ Ward 86.

²³⁷ Fanning, "Culmination" 45.

she “ever kept [her] back,”²³⁸ she vehemently denies it. The resentment over being used, tied down to the house and denied her own life, however, bubbles to the surface and Elizabeth prays for a second chance to answer her mother’s last question. When the opportunity for reconciliation and redemption does not come, Elizabeth unburdens herself to what Fanning calls “the first confessional voice that presents itself,”²³⁹ Dr. Hyland, Mrs. Devlin’s pretentious doctor. But instead of revealing her true emotions, she only says “I’m sorry I left her. [...] I’m sorry I ever moved.”²⁴⁰ Even after her mother’s death, Elizabeth is not able to break away from the vicious circle of duty and renunciation implemented by her mother’s authority and control.

Nevertheless, there seems to be some hope that the younger generation, the grandchildren, will be able to break free. Frank and Vinnie, Clair’s and Tom’s children, are still too small to remember anything else than a kind old grandmother who gave them sweets and candy and their relationship to the house is not yet affected by the family illusion of the sanctity of the place, as is obvious from their rather comical escapade when they use the front of the house to relieve themselves. But it is primarily Winnie, Elizabeth’s daughter, whose behavior demonstrates that there is a chance for the young women to escape the Irish-American stereotype of obedience and submissiveness. Standing up for her mother, she confronts Louisa Hyland, a self-righteous snob, who indirectly implies that it was Elizabeth’s moving that broke Mrs. Devlin’s heart, and

²³⁸ Cullinan 81.

²³⁹ Fanning 45.

²⁴⁰ Cullinan 278

accuses her husband of misdiagnosing her grandmother and causing her early and painful death.

Ellen Frye considers this particular scene Cullinan's "tempered feminist statement."²⁴¹ According to her, Winnie's action demonstrates that the old generation is passing away with the dying matriarch and the new more spontaneous and truthful generation is coming.²⁴² Nevertheless, as her confrontation is ironed out by Mother Helen Marie, it looks like the Catholic Church, of which the nun is an obvious symbol, will always have the final word in the Irish-American family.

Overall, Cullinan's stand on Catholicism is very complex. On one hand, she describes how its oppressiveness and demand for absolute loyalty and obedience molded the characters of the Devlin children into anxious-to-please, guilt-ridden, and insecure individuals. On the other hand, she shows that the Catholics beliefs and rituals bring solace, support and stability to the grieving family. As Justin realizes at the very end of the novel,

Kneeling was better then standing. Saying the Hail Marys was better than talking. It would make the time pass. It would help fill up the hours.²⁴³

However critical of the negative effects of Catholic faith Cullinan might seem, she also presents it as an ultimately stabilizing and unifying force in times of crisis. After Mrs. Devlin's death, the spirit of Catholicism still dominates the house but it seems it is finally its positive side that prevails.

²⁴¹ Frye 77.

²⁴² See Frye 77.

²⁴³ Cullinan 328.

Although Cullinan's portrayal of Irish Catholics is not very optimistic, she does not make any open judgment on any of the issues she depicts in the novel. The precision of her style – the shifting point of view, meticulously selected details, realistic diction, and repetitiveness of several motifs (the never-ending prayers, the ubiquitous trains, or the tedious cleaning and food preparations), all add to the general tone of the novel that makes readers feel the oppression of the house and the intensely suffocating atmosphere and heat inside and ultimately stirs up their own personal resentment towards Mrs. Devlin's manipulations.

CONCLUSION

The theme of my thesis was Irish-American literature. My main goal was to introduce the literary history of the Irish-Americans in the context of the history of the Irish existence in America and prove that Irish-American ethnic fiction can be considered an evidence of the Irish-American response to historical, social, and also literary situation of particular period. The second part of this thesis focuses on the analyses of two novels written by Irish-American female writers, Mary Doyle Curran's *The Parish and the Hill* and Elizabeth Cullinan's *House of Gold*, whose works belong to the genre of domestic fiction, which is one of the important thematic groups of Irish-American fiction.

The first chapter serves as a point of theoretical departure of my thesis as it outlines the general role of immigration and ethnicity in the development of American society. It also introduces the definition of ethnic literature as a literature that is written by a member of certain ethnic group, about the experience of this group, for the members of this group. The final discussion then concentrates on the general characteristics of Irish-American literature that resulted from a specific role of English language, the Catholic Church and the storytelling tradition in the Irish culture.

The next part of the thesis contains a survey of Irish-American literature from the 19th to 20th century with a special subchapter on Irish-American female writers. The 19th century literature is put into context of the history of Irish immigration, as it was the 19th century that witnessed the greatest influx of the Irish people to America; the 20th century literature is, on the

other hand, put into the context of the Irish experience in America, as the 20th century was full of social changes that affected the already established Irish-American community. Thus contextualized, the survey reveals that the Irish-American literary production – the styles, genres, forms, and themes – has been influenced by the historical and social conditions the Irish-American authors experienced. The modest immigration of Irish Protestants, followed by the enormous influx of the poor, unskilled Irish Catholics, the eventual emergence of Irish-American middle class and the rise of the Irish in post-war American society were reflected, respectively, in satiric pamphlets, didactic and sentimental survival guides for arriving immigrants, etiquette guides for the developing Irish-American middle class, regional realism, and finally in the emergence of multitude of different genres falling into four thematic groups: historical novel, domestic novel, novels about the public life of the Irish-Americans and novels written in the postmodern style. The subchapter focusing on Irish-American female writers shows that it was primarily the domestic fiction that has been in the center of female writers' attention.

The following two chapters concentrate on the analysis of Mary Doyle Curran's *The Parish and the Hill* and Elizabeth Cullinan's *House of Gold*, two novels written in the second half of the 20th century which fall into a thematic group of domestic novel. Curran's *The Parish and the Hill* is a series of interconnected memoirs of three generations of an Irish-American Catholic living in a New England mill town in the 1920s. The main theme of Curran's book is the tension caused by Irish-American transition between working and middle class and the clash of the respective value systems. This tension is

reflected in the description of the old 'shanty' and new 'lace-curtain' Irish-American identity which is represented by the narrator's shanty mother and grandfather and lace-curtain father and aunts. The novel portrays a disintegrating family torn apart by the conflicting demands of their respective classes at the backdrop of the Great depression. Emphasizing the cultural loss the Irish-Americans suffered when they embraced new middle-class identity, the novel ultimately becomes a literary lament, a wake, for the dying Irish culture in America resulting from the Irish-American struggle to assimilate and survive economically and psychologically in a new country.

The last chapter analyses Elizabeth Cullinan's *House of Gold*. The novel concentrates on the Irish-American family, mainly on the confined microcosm of the family relations. The plot centers on a figure of powerful Irish-American matriarch who controls a house and dominates her family with an emotional power of Catholic faith. The discussion on the recurrence of these two conjunct symbols of the dominant mother who controls a house reveals that the factors that influenced the appearance of this symbolism lie in the actual Irish experience. The living conditions in Ireland, Catholicism and immigration all influenced the emergence of domestic matriarchy; the economic situation in Ireland and America and the American middle-class values, on the other hand, strengthened the role of the house in the Irish-American cultural tradition. Revolving precisely around these two symbols, Cullinan's novel exposes the bitter truth that the ethnic family life can be at the same time supportive and constricting and that the house originally perceived as a shelter can be as easily turned into an isolating cage.

The two novels analyzed in the last two chapters are only specimens of the Irish-American domestic fiction. The actual number of novels is obviously much higher. As the female writers seem to be largely neglected by the literary scholars, this area offers a huge amount of possibilities for further research.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mary Doyle Curran (1917 – 1983)

Born in 1917 to a family of a mill-worker living in Holyoke, Massachusetts, Curran herself experienced the life of a second-generation immigrant. Her father worked in a skilled profession in the mill, her mother had the traditional role of home-maker but she was also active outside the house. Curran was the first one in the family to attend college, working at odd jobs through her studies to pay for it. She graduated from the University of Massachusetts in Amherst in 1940 and later received her Master's degree at the State University of Iowa. Later in her life, she taught English at Wellesley College and the University of Massachusetts in Boston. She lived a life of contradiction, choosing career and writing over marriage and motherhood, which was very daring in the 1950s.

Physically disabled, she was "sensitive to disabling conditions under which others might suffer." She fought all kinds of discrimination – class, race, ethnic, or gender – till the end of her life. She died of cancer in 1981. The list of her published work is not long. Her only novel, *The Parish in the Hill*, was published in 1948. Many of her short stories, novel chapters and poems have been published in "The Massachusetts Review" and "Ploughshares." Most of her work, however, still remains in manuscript. She was also an Irish Studies scholar, her academic work concentrated on James Joyce.²⁴⁴

²⁴⁴ My information comes from Anne Halley's afterword to the 2nd edition of *The Parish and the Hill* and the obituary printed in the *Boston Globe*.

Elizabeth Cullinan (1933 –)

Born in 1933 to Irish parents, Cullinan was raised in New York City. She was educated in local parochial schools and at Marymount College in Manhattan. In 1955, she started to work as a secretary in the *New Yorker*, working for William Maxwell. Her literary career was launched in 1960 when her first short stories appeared in the *New Yorker*. These were later collected in *The Time of Adam* (1971). During the 1960s Cullinan lived for several years in Ireland, but continued to publish her stories in the *New Yorker* and other magazines until the 1970s. Her first novel *House of Gold* appeared in 1970 and became the Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship Novel for that year. In 1977, *Yellow Roses*, a second collection of her short stories was published. At the same year, Cullinan spent a term teaching at the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop. Her second novel, *A Change of Season*, a story of an Irish-American woman in Dublin, appeared in 1982.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁵ Information on Elizabeth Cullinan's life is mostly unavailable. The data presented here come from Frye's entry on Elizabeth Cullinan in *Catholic Women Writers: A Bio-bibliographical Sourcebook* and Murphy's article "Elizabeth Cullinan: Yellow and Gold" in *Irish-American Fiction: Essays in Criticism*.

CZECH SUMMARY

Tématem této diplomové práce je irsko-americká literatura. Vzhledem k tomu, že tato část americké literatury nepatří mezi nejznámější, rozhodla jsem se práci koncipovat jako jakýsi úvod do celé problematiky. Mým cílem je představit irsko-americkou literární historii v kontextu dějin irské imigrace a života irské menšiny v Americe a tímto způsobem dokázat, že díla irsko-americké etnické literatury lze považovat za relevantní historické prameny vypovídající o konkrétní historické době, sociální situaci a reakci jedinců na dané okolnosti. Druhá část diplomové práce pak obsahuje rozbor dvou románů dvou irsko-amerických spisovatelek, jmenovitě románu *The Parish and the Hill* (1948) od Mary Doyle Curranové a *House of Gold* (1970) od Elizabeth Cullinanové. Oba tyto romány se řadí do žánru rodinného románu (angl. domestic novel), který patří mezi významné tématické skupiny irsko-americké prózy.

Vzhledem k tomu, že irsko-americká literatura patří v americké etnické literatuře k těm nejstarším a nejkomplexnějším, není možné ji v rámci této práce pojmout v celém jejím rozsahu. Rozhodla jsem se proto zaměřit pouze na irsko-americkou prózu, přestože poezie a především drama jsou velmi důležitou součástí irsko-americké literární tradice. Předmětem mého zájmu jsou také pouze ti autoři irského původu, kteří ve svých dílech popisují život a zkušenosti Irů v Americe. Slavní spisovatelé, jako například Francis Scott Fitzgerald, Flannery O'Connorová či Joyce Carol Oatesová, se právě z tohoto důvodu v práci neobjevují. Práce naopak nabízí bližší pohled na nepříliš známé dílo irsko-amerických ženských autorek, které jsou ve

vědeckých studiích, týkajících se této oblasti etnické literatury, ve velké většině opomíjeny.

První kapitola je jakýmsi teoretickým úvodem do problematiky přistěhovalectví a etnických menšin a jejich vlivu na vývoj americké společnosti a kultury. Tato kapitola také přináší definici etnické literatury jakožto literatury psané členy etnické skupiny o jejich zkušenosti v Americe pro publikum z vlastních řad. Závěr kapitoly pak patří interpretaci hlavních charakteristických znaků irsko-americké literatury, které jsou výsledkem vlivu angličtiny, katolické církve a tradice vyprávění v irské kultuře.

Následující kapitola obsahuje historický přehled irsko-americké literatury 19. a 20. století a speciální podkapitolu, která se věnuje irsko-americkým spisovatelkám. Tato kapitola je rozdělena na dvě, respektive tři části. První část se zaměřuje na vývoj irsko-americké literatury v 19. století, který uvádí do kontextu irského přistěhovalectví do USA. Právě toto století bylo totiž svědkem největšího přílivu Irů do Ameriky. Druhá část se pak věnuje literatuře 20. století, která je naopak zasazena do kontextu života a zkušenosti Irů v USA, protože 20. století bylo plné sociálních změn, které přímo ovlivnily již existující irskou komunitu.

První nepříliš početnou vlnu irských přistěhovalců tvořili především irští protestanti, většinou řemeslníci, obchodníci a intelektuálové, kteří se vzhledem ke své náboženské příslušnosti velmi rychle asimilovali. Literární odpověď této první generace přistěhovalců na novou životní situaci měla formu satiry. Autoři se však neomezovali jen na satiru amerického prostředí a životního stylu, ale i na zesměšnění sebe sama, což vypovídá o určité úrovni vzdělání a sebedůvěry v novém prostředí.

Další generace irských přistěhovalců však byla pravým opakem generace předešlé. Ve 40. letech 19. století Irsko několikrát po sobě postihla neúroda brambor, které byly primárním zdrojem potravy, a zemi zachvátil katastrofální hladomor, který si vyžádal skoro jeden a půl milionu obětí na životech. Neutěšená ekonomická situace se stala důvodem pro emigraci dalších dvou milionů obyvatel, kteří hledali útočiště hlavně ve Spojených státech. Nově příchozí imigranti byli ve velké většině nepříliš vzdělaní katolíci, kteří pocházeli z chudých zemědělských oblastí Irska. Přesto se však většina z nich usadila ve městech na východním pobřeží. Nepřipravení na městský život, irští přistěhovalci velmi brzy zaujali pozice v nejnižší společenské vrstvě – ženy pracovaly jako služky, muži jako námezdní dělníci. Irské etnikum se také velmi často potýkalo s diskriminací a nenávisť ze strany amerických protestantů. Irsko-američtí autoři této generace patřili k vyšší katolické třídě a v rámci osvětové činnosti reagovali na vzniklé sociální problémy pomocí didaktických a sentimentálních příruček pro přežití (angl. survival guides) určeným nově příchozím krajanům. Šlo o romány, které popisovaly zkušenosti s imigrací a životem ve Spojených státech, jejichž hlavním účelem bylo kromě pomoci v nouzi i upevnění katolické víry v nepřátelském protestantském prostředí. Zářným příkladem jsou romány Mary Anne Sadlier.

Na přelomu 19. a 20. století došlo k zásadním změnám ve společenském postavení Irů žijících v Americe. Ke konci století začali Irové přecházet od nekvalifikované námezdní práce k odbornějším zaměstnáním. Lepší práce znamenala především zlepšení životní úrovně, což vyzdvihlo ty, kteří byli takto úspěšní, na úroveň střední třídy. Přijetí do americké

protestantské střední třídy však nebylo jednoduché. Změna společenského postavení a problémy s ní spojené ovlivnily i literární produkci, která se opět zaměřila na didaktické a sentimentální romány, tentokrát ovšem určené novým členům střední třídy jako „učebnice“ správného chování. Na literárním horizontu se však začala objevovat i díla, které ovlivnila vlna realismu a naturalismu v americké literatuře, která kombinovala sentimentální děj s prvky realismu. Představiteli těchto dvou proudů irsko-americké literatury je Maurice Francis Egan, který zastupuje právě onu sentimentální a didaktickou linii, a Finley Peter Dunne, jenž se svými satirickými, přesto však realistickými, popisy života v Chicagu stal průkopníkem realistické tradice.

Po mnohaleté odmlce, kdy nevznikala žádná zásadní díla irsko-americké literatury, se realismus projevil v plné síle až ve 30. letech 20. století v knize Jamese T. Farrella *Young Lonigan: A Boyhood in Chicago Streets* (1932), která upevnila dodnes silnou realistickou tendenci v irsko-americké próze. Oblíbenou formou se v daném období stala autobiografie či autobiografický román, v nichž autoři těžili ze své vlastní irsko-americké zkušenosti. Po druhé světové válce již byla irská komunita právoplatnou součástí americké společnosti. Více příležitostí k dosažení vyššího vzdělání vedlo i k dalšímu postupu na společenském žebříčku. Celkový úspěch Irů v Americe završila volba Johna F. Kennedyho americkým prezidentem. Znovunabytá etnická sebedůvěra se projevila i v rozkvětu irsko-americké literatury. Etnická zkušenost byla najednou nazírána ze všech možných úhlů pohledu, v množství forem a stylů. Z nepřeberného zástupu děl irsko-americké literatury, která vznikla v poválečné době vyvstávají čtyři

tématické okruhy: 1) historické romány (hl. představitel Thomas Flannagan), 2) romány o vnějším světě práce, v nichž jsou hlavními hrdiny kněží, politici a policisté (hl. představitel Edwin O'Connor), 3) rodinné romány, jejichž děj se většinou točí kolem postavy dominantní matky a rodinného domu (hl. představitelka Elizabeth Cullinan), a 4) romány psané v moderním a postmoderním stylu (hl. představitel William Kennedy). Třetí podkapitola této části, která se věnuje uměleckému vývoji irsko-amerických spisovatelek potvrzuje, že ve středu zájmu těchto autorek leží především rodinný román, tedy zobrazení rodinného života se všemi jeho pozitivními a negativními aspekty.

Následující dvě kapitoly se věnují analýze dvou románů, které jsou příklady právě rodinného románu. První román, *The Parish and the Hill* od Mary Doyle Curranové, je vlastně řadou vzájemně propojených vzpomínek na tři generace irsko-amerických katolíků žijících v malém industriálním městě v Nové Anglii ve 20. letech 20. století. Kniha zachycuje rozpadající se rodinu rozervanou protichůdným přístupem k irsko-americké identitě, jejíž celistvost byla narušena právě vznikem irsko-americké střední třídy. Toto napětí vyvolané srážkou hodnotových systémů nižší, v irsko-americké tradici tzv. „shanty“, a střední, tzv. „lace-curtain“, vrstvy je symbolicky zobrazeno i v konfliktu mezi postavami vypravěččiny matky, zastávající tradiční irskou identitu, a otce, propagujícího novou americkou identitu. Mary Doyle Curranová klade důraz právě na ztrátu, kterou přijetí americké identity způsobilo irsko-americké kultuře. Její román lze v podstatě považovat za žalozpěv nad umírající irskou kulturou, která se vytrácí v boji irských přistěhovalců za přijetí do americké společnosti.

Poslední kapitola této práce analyzuje román Elizabeth Cullinanové *House of Gold*. Autorka se ve svém díle také zaměřuje na téma irsko-americké rodiny, zajímá ji však především mikrokosmos rodinných vztahů. Děj se soustřeďuje okolo postavy dominantní matky, která jako královna panuje ve svém domě a svou rodinu ovládá prostřednictvím emocionální manipulace vycházející z katolické víry. Charakteristika jednotlivých postav románu a jejich chování a názory pak odhalují, že rodina v mnoha případech nejen podporuje, ale i omezuje své členy v jejich rozhodnutí a že dům, původně považovaný za útočiště chránící před nebezpečím vnějšího světa, se může velmi snadno změnit ve vězení zamezující do takového světa vstup. Symbol dominantní matky, která vládne ve svém domě, se v dílech irsko-amerických spisovatelů objevuje velice často, což naznačuje, že jde pravděpodobně o symboliku, která vychází z konkrétní irské zkušenosti. Bližší analýza ukazuje, že to bylo především tradiční uspořádání irské společnosti, katolictví a irské přistěhovalectví, které zásadně ovlivnily zrod postavy silné až dominantní matky. Ekonomická situace v Irsku a ve Spojených státech a hodnoty americké střední třídy pak ovlivnily postoj Irů k vlastnictví rodinného domu.

Jak již bylo řečeno na začátku, tato diplomová práce si klade za cíl především všeobecný úvod do irsko-americké literární historie. Dva romány, které jsou analyzovány v druhé části práce, jsou taktéž pouhým úvodem do specifické oblasti irsko-amerického rodinného románu. Jak samotná irsko-americká literární historie, tak i tato specifická tématická oblast, skýtá nepřeberné množství možností pro další výzkum a podrobnější analýzu.

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