



Caneda-Cabrera, Maria Teresa & Carregal-Romero, José (editors). *Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction: Silences that Speak*. Palgrave Macmillan, February 2023, pp. 258. ISBN 978-3-031-30455-2 (eBook)

Published in 2023 by Palgrave Macmillan, *Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction: Silences that Speak* proposes to explore the topic of silence by analysing how it is embedded in language, culture, society and institutions and providing a forum for the discussion of the uses (and abuses) of silence in the context of Irish fiction. The collection was edited by Maria Teresa Caneda-Cabrera (Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Vigo, Spain) and José Carregal-Romero (lecturer at the University of Huelva, Spain). Caneda-Cabrera has been a member of the Editorial Board of European Joyce Studies-Brill since 2010 and coordinated the State and ERDF funded Research Project “INTRUTHS: Inconvenient Truths: Cultural Practices of Silence in Contemporary Irish Literature”. Carregal-Romero is the co-editor of *Revolutionary Ireland, 1916–2016: Historical Facts & Social Transformations Re-Assessed* (2020), and the author of *Queer Whispers: Gay and Lesbian Voices of Irish Fiction* (2021).

The introduction, titled “Silences that Speak”, focuses on presenting the different definitions of silence proposed by different authors. The collection of essays aims at reframing silence not as a void or absence, but as an active agent in the construction of meaning, and a vehicle for the communication of various forms of quietly perpetuated or repressed knowledge. In literature, and especially in Irish literature, silence is then used to denounce the existence of a normative silence deeply embedded in social, religious and cultural practices which have shaped individual behaviours and interpersonal relationships and are woven into the fabric of society and politics in contemporary Ireland. The essays cover a span of different well-known authors in the Irish literary sphere such as Donal Ryan, Emma Donoghue, Colm

Tóibín, Evelyn Conlon, Kevin Barry, Edna O'Brien, William Trevor, Claire Keegan, Maeve Kelly, Eibhear Walshe, Emer Martin and Sally Rooney

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the role of silence within the framework of contemporary historical novels. Chapter 2, titled “Conspicuously Silent: The Excesses of Religion and Medicine in Emma Donoghue’s Historical Novels *The Wonder* and *The Pull of the Stars*” by Marisol Morales-Ladrón, argues that this specific genre should not be perceived merely as narratives set in the past, but rather as vehicles that challenge and fill in the gaps left by traditional, often biased historical narratives. In a similar vein, Chapter 3, “To Pick Up the Unsaid, and Perhaps Unknown, Wishes: Reimagining the True Stories of the Past in Evelyn Conlon’s *Not the Same Sky*”, by M. Teresa Caneda-Cabrera, analyses the rewritings of the Great Famine and the unstable and often ambiguous use of memory as a narrative device.

Chapters 4 and 5 analyse the use of silence via an aesthetic perspective. Chapter 4, “He’s Been Wanting to Say That for a Long Time”: Varieties of Silence in Colm Tóibín’s Fiction” by José Carregal-Romero, focuses on multiple works by writer Colm Tóibín in which silence features as an aesthetic practice to highlight the tensions between emotional release and reticence, and the ambiguities between knowing and unknowing. Meanwhile, Chapter 5, titled “The Irish Short Story and the Aesthetics of Silence” by Elke D’hoker, observes a rising trend in contemporary short stories where silence emerges not as a void, but as a mode of reverence, privacy, and connection, particularly with the natural world. D’hoker argues that in an era marked by growing environmental consciousness, silence in Irish short fiction serves as a conduit for communion with the non-verbal aspects of existence.

Chapters 6 and 7 focus on the tool of silence via a gendered approach. Chapter 6, “Infinite Spaces: Kevin Barry’s *Lives of Quiet Desperation*” by Thomas O’Grady, focuses on the male character and the social landscape that forces men to confront not only the limitations of language but also its inadequacy in articulating the emotional complexity of their private traumas. O’Grady argues that male characters in the text are faced with varying degrees of silence, which manifests in feelings of loneliness, isolation, and diminished self-worth, underscoring their struggle to express themselves effectively, both internally and in their interactions with others. On the other hand, the following chapter titled “The Silencing of Speranza” by Eibhear Walshe, takes on the female perspective, not by analysing female characters but by considering the mother of Oscar Wilde, Speranza, and the silencing and distorting of her scholarly and intellectual career through her life and after her passing.

Chapters 8 and 10 focus on the interconnections between silence and the feeling of shame, often connected to the history of the catholic church in Ireland. Chapter 8, “A Self-Interested Silence”: Silences Identified and Broken in Peter Lennon’s *Rocky Road to Dublin (1967)*” by Seán Crosson, focuses on Peter Lennon’s 1967 documentary *Rocky Road to Dublin* as a relevant text which illustrates how silence has prevailed well into Ireland’s society and culture until this very day, concerning clerical abuse in Ireland. Chapter 10, the second contribution by Caneda-Cabrera, titled “Sure, Aren’t the Church Doing Their Best?: Breaking Consensual Silence in Emer Martin’s *The Cruelty Men*”, further expands on the topic. The analysis focuses on the novel partly inspired by the Ryan Report and the Murphy Report, and directly confronts institutional abuse, challenging not only its existence but also its pervasive silence. To Caneda-Cabrera, Martin’s narrative explicitly highlights how institutional abuse often occurred in plain sight, yet paradoxically remained unspoken, relegated to the margins of official discourse due to complicit social norms of silence.

Chapters 9 and 11 focus on the cultural shift post-Celtic Tiger and the habituated silences where power resides. “Silence in Donal Ryan’s Fiction” by Asier Altuna-García de Salazar explores how Ryan’s depiction of social silences in Ireland exposes the consequences of religious, institutional, hetero-patriarchal and class structures on different discourses of the individual and the community over time and those silenced by it. Chapter 11, “Unspeakable Injuries and Neoliberal Subjectivities in Sally Rooney’s *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*”, once again by Carregal-Romero, explores how Rooney’s protagonists display an uneasiness that exposes the inequalities and deceptions of their neoliberal culture, while also using silence as the abandonment of pretences, creating a sense of deep intimacy of close relationships within characters, creating a feeling of more genuine connection.

The tradition of silence in Irish history and culture is undeniable – and that is well reflected in its literature and the essays presented in this volume. *Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction: Silences that Speak* offers a profound exploration into the multifaceted dimensions of silence within the Irish contemporary literary context. It delves into the historical, cultural, and literary implications of silence, revealing it not merely as an absence of sound, but as a powerful force shaping Irish identity and its narratives. From the silence of sociopolitical oppression to the quietude of contemplative spaces, each chapter uncovers layers of meaning, inviting readers to contemplate the significance of what is not spoken out loud, but in actions, beliefs or erasures. As we journey through each of

the works selected for this insightful compilation, we are reminded of the nuanced ways in which silence both conceals and reveals truths, echoing throughout the rich tapestry of Irish culture. With its thought-provoking analysis and illuminating perspectives, this book stands as an indispensable resource for scholars and enthusiasts alike, inviting us to listen attentively to that which is left unspoken.

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Notes

¹ Grant Number 2022/04123-, São Paulo Research Foundation.