Toxic Masculinity in Contemporary Irish Fiction: Entitlement, Ego and Violence in *Asking for It* and *Bad Day in Blackrock*.

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According to *The Good Men Project*, an initiative that aims to challenge public perception of what it means to be a man in the 21st Century, toxic masculinity is a form of manhood that is: "defined by violence, sex, status, and aggression. It's the cultural ideal of manliness, where strength is everything while emotions are a weakness; where sex and brutality are yardsticks by which men are measured" (O'Malley, 2016). In this paper I will look at two contemporary Irish novels, Louise O'Neill's *Asking For It* and Kevin Power's *Bad Day in Blackrock*, both of which address the concept of Toxic Masculinity and the societies which have a turned a blind eye to this behaviour. Both novels explicitly feature the aftermath of the assaults and how the victims become footnotes in their own stories, allowing the national conversation to turn into a social commentary which can harm more than heal.

Louise O'Neill's *Asking For It* is told in first person narrative and lays forth the circumstances surrounding the sexual assault of eighteen-year-old Emma, at a house party following a Gaelic football final, and is split into 'Before' and 'After'. O' Neill based her novel on the real-life Stubenville rape case - where footballers sexually assaulted a girl and posted a live video of the attack - but shifted the location to rural Ireland. Photos of the assault are distributed online and, although Emma has no recollection of the events, the photos capture the horror of the gang-rape – assaults which are performed by a group of her so-called friends. O'Neill describes her reaction to stories from Ohio and why she focused on the support for the accused: "It wasn't just the fact that these men had violated this girl in the most reprehensible manner…It was their sense of entitlement which I thought was incredible. They thought they were infallible" (Barry, 2015).

In *Asking For It: The Alarming Rise of Rape Culture – and What We Can Do About It*, Kate Harding gives examples of the sense of entitlement in the world of team sport, explaining that it is not just the players who believe in their infallibility, but their supporters too:

> …an off-duty police officer traveling with Roethlisberger's [Pittsburgh Steelers Quarterback accused of rape in March 2010] entourage, reported that [Sergeant] Blash said words to the effect of, 'We have a problem. This drunken bitch, drunk off her ass, is accusing Ben of rape. This pisses me off. Women can do this. It's bullshit, but we've got to do this, we've got to do a report. This is BS. She's making shit up' (Harding, 2015, 84).

This supposition can be seen when O'Neill's protagonist, Emma, reports her rape to the Gardaí and the local community choose to rally around the four boys accused of the assault, implying that Emma is ruining their lives. The local priest, previously a firm family friend, delivers his judgment from the pulpit at Sunday Mass and Emma's mother fills her daughter in:

> 'His sermon was about not judging others, and how important it is to assume that everyone is innocent until proven guilty. He didn't use any names – oh, he couldn't do that, could he? – but everyone knew who he was talking about, and your father and I like idiots in the top pew, after giving fifty euro to the collection plate…
> And everyone staring at us, and muttering under their breath –'
> 'Please, Mam –'
> 'And then Ciarán O'Brien on my way to take Holy Communion, and he winked at me, he actually winked –'
> 'I don't want to –'

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'And then, oh, I'm keeping the best till last, young lady. Just wait until you hear this. Then Father Michael waited at the church door until Sean Casey and Paul O'Brien…'
(What was Paul O'Brien doing at Mass?)
'… came out, and he shook their hands, and offered his condolences' (O'Neill, 2015, 292-293).

Liston explains the importance placed on GAA players and their place in their individual communities: "[T]he relationships between GAA members and supporters endure, whether on the basis of parish and club, county and province. There is a unique blend of solidarity and rivalry. Involvement in the GAA is, above all, about identity, bonding and belonging." (Liston, 2014, 204).

Bad Day in Blackrock is a fictional tale based on the killing of nineteen-year-old Brian Murphy outside Anabel's nightclub, in August 2000. Three young men were arrested in connection with Brian's death but, as Keane suggests:

For the Murphy family it must have been the nightmare end to a four-and-a-half-year living hell. Their 19-year-old boy had been killed in front of dozens of people and no one was responsible… The criminal justice system had failed them and put the final nail in his coffin (Keane, 2005, 1).

Power's novel explores the circumstances surrounding the death of Conor Harris, a recent graduate of an expensive South Dublin school, who is kicked to death outside a nightclub. It is narrated by someone who has become obsessed with the details surrounding the death. Borrowing a technique used by F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*, Power affords his narrator licence to reflect and reveal the story of a "uniquely Irish" private school system and how our middle-class young men "form a society unto themselves". (Power, 2011). The reader is informed that the upcoming narrative is speculative and pieced together via snippets of information gathered during his own research, since that fateful night:

I can't tell this story. Let's be clear about that from the beginning. I wasn't there. I didn't see it happen…
No I wasn't there on the night itself. But I might have been. It might have happened to anyone, at any time, on any night… (Power, 2008, 14)

Power introduces us to the world of middle-class team sport in Ireland, and the institutions they hail from. There are glimpses into their world of expectation and entitlement and the looming presence of toxic masculinity. The boys involved in the fatal attack on Conor are all teammates from a private school rugby team:

Three people killed Conor Harris outside Harry's Niteclub on the last night of summer, 2004. Two of them were Brookfield boys. The other had gone to Brookfield College and then transferred to Merrion Academy. These things matter. These things make a difference. […] They're both rugby school, they're both single sex, and they're both famous for the outstanding achievements of their students." (Power, 2008, 25).

Moreover, the boys have been groomed in the ethos of mateship and with a code of silence:

When the [class retreat] was over, we were given little badges to wear. We took them back to Dublin and wore them as though we were Freemasons, a society bound together by the secret sameness of our hearts (Power, 2008, 73).

Connell describes group sport mentality as one that can often lead to violent behaviour; a mentality that is based on a system of:

Organised competitive team sport – a distinctively modern social practice – is intensely gender-segregated and male-dominated […] A recreation involving bodies in ritualised combat is thus presented to enormous numbers

of youth as a site of masculine camaraderie, a source of identity, an arena of competition for prestige, and a possible career (Connell, 2005, 15)

This can also be seen to be true in GAA, as alluded to by Liston in his essay entitled 'The GAA and the sporting Irish':

As well as being a strong form of collective identity, sport has become a significant form of social and political capital. Sport is a major form of social integration and networking […] At a micro level, success in sport is often a pathway into local and national politics. At a macro level, sport galvanises national identity (Liston, 2014, 205)

Hegemonic masculinity is ever-present in both novels, with toxic undertones. Barker explains how: "men have been acculturated to seek esteem through public performance and the recognition of achievement. This can take many forms, [including] violence through sport" but can also become embodied in all aspects of life:

[T]raditional masculinity has encompassed the values of strength, power, stoicism, action, control, independence, self-sufficiency, male camaraderie/mateship and work, amongst others. Devalued were relationships, verbal ability, domestic life, tenderness, communication women and children. (Barker, 2008, 312).

In *Asking For It*, the characters discuss consent as if it is an afterthought: "Girls are all the same,' Dylan says, rolling his eyes. 'Get wasted and get a bit slutty, then in the morning try to pretend it never happened because you regret it" (O'Neill, 2015, 30). While Emma had originally entered a bedroom with one of the team players, she had not consented to sex, nor was she conscious when she was assaulted by the other players who entered the room. Krien suggests that gang-rape is more prevalent in team sports than we have been led to believe:

It is usually a lone woman with three or more men. And while the act is nothing new – the former coach and sports writer Roy Masters says it has been an unofficial team-bonding activity for some time – it's only recently that players have been forced to defend it, and part of that defence is calling it 'group sex'. But off the record, among coaches and footballers, it's always been a 'gangbang' (Krien, 2014, 46).

Masters wrote that players enjoy each other's company and 'anything that unites them,' listing excursions such as fishing, going to the movies and paintball, before adding gangbangs (although he calls it group sex) to the mix. […] The sex isn't equalising; rather it's the intimacy within the tribe being 'one of the boys', which is the bonding mechanism (Krien, 2014, 141).

The narrative in *Bad Day in Blackrock* alludes to the culture of hegemonic masculinity in team sport, where the team mates see their girlfriends as objects; ones that have to make the grade:

He had known, the minute he saw the pool, that he would have to break up with Claire Lawrence. Why? Because she just wasn't classy enough. She didn't deserve a boyfriend with a pool. […]She was an embarrassment. 'Always open her mouth at the wrong fucking moment,' Richard confided to Barry Fox. 'And not so I could shove my cock in it, you know?' Barry and Richard high-fived (Power, 2008, 24).

Stephen O'Brien used to boast that he had fucked at least one girl from each of the Dublin private girls' school. 'I'm missing Mount Anville, man,' he would complain to the Brookfield boy. On nights out in Russell's or the Wicked Wolf Stephen would tell his friends to prowl the dance floor in search of a Mountie, and to let him know if they found one (Power, 2008, 86).

Interestingly, both novels feature characters that are specifically described as unlikable. This is an intentional device used by the authors to address the concept of "Asking for It" and

opens a contemporary discourse surrounding violence, entitlement and consent. Not all victims are angels and both narratives reflect this.

Power shows the built up of tension between Conor and his team mates and implies that jealously and previous altercations (on and off-pitch) may have contributed to the anger resulting in the fatal blows delivered on the night in question. This is a constant reminder, throughout the novel, with the recurring appearance of the words "Bang. Bang. Bang" representing the three kicks thought to have caused Conor's death (Power, 2008, 102):

In the words of certain people – spoken after the fact, after Conor was dead – 'Conor Harris was no angel.' […] This is something that certain people haven't wanted to acknowledge about Conor Harris. Sometimes, he could be a real cunt. (Power, 2008, 52).

Similarly, O'Neill purposely writes Emma as a "mean girl", self-absorbed and constantly seeking attention: "I wanted to invert that trope of the idea of the victim being this sweet innocent girl…to make the reader almost complicit because of the fact Emma is unlikable…to almost get to a point where they are saying she was asking for it" (Barry, 2015). Notably, early on in the novel, Emma discourages her friend from reporting a sexual assault for fear that they will no longer be invited to parties in their community:

'It's happened to loads of people. It happens all the time. You wake up the next morning, and you regret it or you don't remember what happened exactly, but it's easier not to make a fuss' (O'Neill, 2015, 92).

It would change everything.
I didn't want anything to change.
Let's just pretend it didn't happen, I told her. *It's easier that way. Easier for you* (O'Neill, 2015, 93-94).

In conclusion, both *Asking For It* and *Bad Day in Blackrock* are novels which are based on actual events and address the concept of "toxic masculinity" in team sports. This concept has received much attention in recent years, with the media highlighting cases such as the Belfast Rape Trial, where Rugby players were accused of sexually assaulting a teenager after a team party; the online treatment of #SlaneGirl, who performed oral sex in front of an audience at a music concert and photos of which was shared on social media sites and the Ballyragget GAA Scandal, which saw young footballers celebrating a club final win with strippers in a local pub. Both novels argue that toxic masculinity is an ongoing problem in contemporary Irish society, and one that needs to be addressed by both Irish society and its institutions.

The sex of the authors allows for different interpretations of toxic masculinity and its effects. Whilst O'Neill allows for an insight into the mind of an abused female character, and the gender imbalance of sexual power and freedom, Power concentrates on the idea of entitlement of males, both physically and sexually, in a world where sporting prowess is a gateway to future success. The Irish private school system can be seen as a breeding ground for future leaders and influencers within our governmental, economic, medical and social system and "boys will be boys" is no longer an acceptable excuse for hegemonic and toxic behaviour. In reading both novels, with opposite gendered protagonists, we garner alternate insights into the masculine-heavy world of Irish sport.

The use of unlikeable protagonists in each novel allows for a more nuanced reading of difficult narratives. *Asking For It* portrays Emma as an insecure, yet self-centred, teen who uses sex as a way to prove her worth, while in *Bad Day in Blackrock*, Power includes retrospective allusions to Conor's darker side. In doing this, the authors are opening a discourse on 'Asking for It' and its repercussions. Through open discourse on toxic

masculinity, the tradition of bystanders and toleration could change the future of society and, by ending both novels with a realistic, disheartening tone it allows for a conversation about how we can approach this change.

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