THE RHETORIC OF SATIRE IN EVELYN CONLON'S *TELLING* (2000)

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Abstract

The work of Evelyn Conlon has often been approached from a feminist perspective. However, her multifaceted style and ironic wit are far from having been examined in depth. This essay examines two stories by Conlon entitled «The Park» and «Birth Certificates». These were first published in *Taking Scarlet as a Real Colour* in 1993, and reprinted in *Telling* in 2000. Here I apply Dustin Griffin's interdisciplinary conception of satiric discourse based on a rhetoric of inquiry, provocation, play and display. Conlon's writing is not only formally experimental, but also possesses rhetorical variety. Conlon offers new perspectives on the topics she deals with by making a skilful use of irony, paradox, wit and wry humour. Her control of the rhetoric of satire allows her to «tell» uncomfortable truths about the lives of women in Ireland whilst allowing her to denounce the way women were perceived in Ireland at this time.

Keywords: Irish short story, experimentation, rhetoric of satire, Menippean tradition, women's lives.

Resumen

La obra de Evelyn Conlon ha sido analizada frecuentemente bajo una perspectiva feminista. Sin embargo, su estilo polifacético e ingenio irónico distan mucho de haber sido analizados en profundidad. Este artículo examina dos relatos de Conlon titulados «The Park» y «Birth Certificates». Estas historias fueron publicadas en *Taking Scarlet as a Real Colour* en 1993, y reimpresas en *Telling* (2000). En este trabajo, aplico la concepción interdisciplinar del discurso satírico de Dustin Griffin que se basa en la interrogación retórica, la retórica de la provocación, la retórica de la representación y la retórica de la exposición. La obra de Conlon no es sólo formalmente experimental, sino que también posee variedad retórica. Conlon ofrece nuevas perspectivas sobre los temas que trata haciendo un uso muy hábil de la ironía, la paradoja, el ingenio y el humor sardónico. Su dominio de la retórica de la sátira le permite contar verdades incómodas sobre las vidas de las mujeres en Irlanda y denunciar el modo en que se percibía a las mujeres en Irlanda en esa época.

Palabras clave: Relato breve irlandés, experimentación, retórica de la sátira, tradición menipea, vidas de mujeres.

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INTRODUCTION

Evelyn Conlon was born in Co. Monaghan, part of the Border Region and located in the province of Ulster, in 1952. She is a radical Protestant who was reared a Catholic, but departed Catholicism soon. In late 1975, she joined the Irishwomen United; a group of radical activists, journalists and writers established in 1975 who outlined their political objectives in the magazine *Banshee*, to which Conlon was a contributor. These consisted of struggling against women's oppression in Ireland by undertaking an ongoing fight around a charter of demands which were published there, namely, the removal of all legal and bureaucratic obstacles to equality, free legal contraception, the recognition of motherhood and parenthood as a social function, equality in education, and the male rate for a job where men and women were working together. This Manifesto which can be viewed as written evidence of how women «began to develop a renewed consciousness of the wrongs by which they were oppressed»[2] had a tremendous impact on Irish society.

During this period, which meant the liberation of Ireland from its dependent status, these women's desire to assert themselves as women was often viewed as of secondary importance when compared to the need to clarify an unstable national identity. However, their level of involvement was very strong. They were continuously taking up political issues, forced mainstream politicians to take notice of their demands and eventually gained many of them. Thanks to the way they fought, these women managed to open up whole areas —for instance, contraception[3] and abortion— to men and women that would never have been open to them before.

Despite these developments, then came the years of backlash, 1980s, aided by the economic recession of the mid-1980s and by the strengthening of conservative opinion following Pope John Paul's visit to Ireland in September 1979. During these years of the antagonistic right-wing reaction to liberal trends, Conlon stood out as one of many Irish women writers who signalled desire for change and showed a determination to bring it about. As O'Regan[4] points out, «The founding members of this group lobbied [....] gradually for a reform in the eclipsing of women in society, both on governing bodies and in the workplace» [...] «The voices of these women

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[2] S. Kilfeather, «Irish Feminism», in J. Cleary and C. Connolly (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 108.

[3] S. Kilfeather (*ibidem*, p. 109) describes how «The ban on contraception in the Republic emerged as a key issue and in May 1971 a group of women went to Belfast to purchase contraceptives, and returned with them to Dublin, flouting Customs officials.

[4] K. O'Regan, «The Female experience: Society, gender and identity in the short stories of Evelyn Conlon», 2007-2008, p. 2 [Retrieved from: http://es.scribd.com/doc/104617134/The-Female-Experience-Society-Gender-and-Identity-in-the-Short-Stories-of-Evelyn-Conlon. Accessed: 27/09/2012]

[were] often angry, hurt, confused or indignant»[5]. The culmination of this quiet revolution was the election in 1990 of Mary Robinson, a feminist and a barrister, as the first woman President of Ireland. Her election was regarded as a symbol of a new Ireland, more confident, and a triumph for those supporting a modernizing liberal agenda over those associated with nationalist and Catholic traditionalism. This period displayed a growing national confidence, increased social tolerance, economic optimism and a growth in cultural sophistication.

The two stories that are the object of analysis here, «The Park» and «Birth-Certificates»[6], recreate not only Irish male and women experience previous to this right-wing backlash, but also the conditions that finally allowed Irish women to become equal citizens not only on paper, but also in practice. «The Park» brings back the occasion of Pope John II's visit, examining what the narrator and her liberal-minded friends felt because they were dissenters that day. This story also shows the strong influence of religion, especially Catholicism and its teachings, on the lives of Irish men and women from that day onwards. «Birth-Certificates» is about a journalist called Maolíosa who wants to find out about adopted babies. Her boyfriend Cathal is not very keen on the idea, but it becomes an obsession for her. Maolíosa is fascinated with the idea of bringing together adults with their long-lost mothers and, although she is persuaded by her boyfriend Cathal that the coy article she plans to write will never be published, she can't give up.

Like most Irish women short stories written from 1980 to the present, Conlon's stories show not only an extraordinary range and quality, but also, as Ingman[7] argues, «a strong determination to put women's lives at the centre of her work». These two stories by Conlon explore a female perspective on religion, the Church, Ireland's traditional family values, the relationship between Irish men and women, those who have power and those who do not, sexual identity and adoption, to specify a few topics that are ripe for analysis. Conlon's approach to these topics is sharp, detached and, above all, non-moralistic. Gaisford[8] endorses this last idea, when she argues that «These are Irish stories, certainly, but they are never judgmental: instead, they are defiantly clear-sighted, rigorously unsentimental». The critic also defines Conlon's fiction as work that «avoids didacticism because of her multifaceted style and her ironic wit»[9]. Here is an example of it from «Birth Certificates»:

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[5] *Ibidem*, p. 4.

[6] E. Conlon, E., *Taking Scarlet as a Real Colour*. Belfast, The Blackstaff Press, 1993. The edition used and quoted in this article will be *Telling: New and Selected Stories*. Belfast, The Blackstaff Press, 2000.

[7] H. Ingman, *A History of the Irish Short Story*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 253.

[8] S. Gaisford, S. «Wild rover in a bar: Taking scarlet as a real colour». Review of *Taking Scarlet as a Real Colour*, by Evelyn Conlon. *Independent*, Saturday 7 August 1993 [Retrieved from: http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/book-review—wild-rover-in-a-bar-taking-scarlet-as-a-real-colour—evelyn-conlon-blackstaff-press-699-1459713.html. Accessed: 30/09/2012].

[9] *Ibidem*, p. 18.

> Regina bit her lip and involuntarily held on to her pubic bone the way men grab their balls during a free kick.
> Because of going through all that, it had seemed silly to tell him [Mrs Coyle's husband] at first and then a month was a year and a half-truth became a half-lie and then a year was five years and she had her 'first' child, and a half-lie became such a monstrous untruth that it didn't bear thinking about. And now his birthday had got her. (166-167)

Conlon's stories not only are non-moral, but also show some satiric features within the Menippean tradition hitherto unobserved by her critics. Conlon's stories are full of repeated questioning, play, irony and paradox and these features convert her into a great rhetorician. Here is another illustration of all these aspects from «Birth Certificates»:

> Maolíosa was twiddling her laces, hugging her knees, closing her eyes tight to stop herself from crying. Come on, come on, crying will only be temporary relief, it won't solve anything. Answer the questions, Maolíosa, she said sternly to herself. She had divided them into single questions rather than one big unruly one. What am I going to do? Why is Cathal so impossible? Has he got tired of me? What am I going to do? What would he say if I said I was leaving? And then, in case he'd say, well, all right, she thought, oh don't be silly, I'm not going to say that. Of course I am staying. I'm staying because I want to stay, he's just out of sorts. (175)

Conlon acknowledges[10] in an interview: «When things are open to question, when you start questioning one thing, you question others. [....] it is really only within the short story that you can play with shifting the language about and allowing the Irish language to influence the way you write, in a way that you can't in a novel». Furthermore, Conlon reveals divergent opinions «on questions of feminism, politics, religion, and publishing» and her interview provides «complicated maps of experiences which make them very difficult to classify and categorize»[11]. Conlon holds all these aspects for scrutiny in a playful manner in her stories. Conlon[12] claims:

> Things have changed a lot. Without a doubt the Catholic Church is not the aggressive force that it was in anybody's life in Ireland now, and certainly not in women's lives, and I tend to deal with this shift *ironically* [....] Re-examining —the place of the Catholic Church in my own thinking and, in a way, that's partly due to the fact that the Catholic Church, and Ireland, have changed. (My emphasis)

[10] R. Pelan, «Interview with Evelyn Conlon». *Hecate*, vol. 26, n.1 (2000), pp. 62-73 [(Interview conducted in Brisbane, August 1999. Retrieved from: http://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:141425. Accessed: 11/07/2012].

[11] C. Moloney and H. Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out: Voices from the Field*. Syracuse, New York, Syracuse University Press, 2003, ix.

[12] R. Pelan, *op. cit.* (2000), p.

In doing so, Conlon's stories not only show that her conception of satire is deeply rhetorical, but also suggests important questions about Ireland's changing cultural map.

Regarding paradox and difficulty, Conlon's satiric rhetoric also feeds on the current debate that favours the abstract, experimental and linguistic short story writing over the concrete and historicized, although this is also grappled within her work as we have just seen with the figures of John Paul II and Mary Robinson. As Conlon[13] admits, «Sometimes, for instance, when I began writing I found it hard to write about awful women. Part of the craft is to learn how to be able to do that». Here is another example of this extracted from «Birth Certificates»

> Aoife had changed her name to Eva, it sounded more important. She was tall and happily thin. She didn't care beyond the next customer in the nightclub, the next good-looking customer that is. She was going to London next week, where you can get jobs like these in the daytime, all day long — winebars. Winebars everywhere. (164)

Moreover, she also argues that, when she began to write, she did not have «a residual faith in the language and literature that was already there» and that she «was fed up with the form of the Irish short story»[14]. For all these reasons, Conlon's stories cannot be viewed simply as satires aimed at derisive reduction and rejection; her fondness for experimentation with satire rhetoric is more complex than that. As O'Regan[15] argues, Conlon

> emerged at a time of burgeoning liberation and creativity in the Republic, and at a time of national crisis and great violence in the North of Ireland. She appeared on the Irish literary scene in an era when traditional perceptions of women were being challenged, and the female voice and female identity were being transformed in the eyes of the nation.

Barros del Río[16] shows Conlon is together with Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Catherine Dunne, Mary Morrissy, Maeve Binchy, Emma Donoghue, Maeve Kelly, Mary Rose Callaghan and Leland Bardwell, among many others, «one of those contemporary authors who are also 'currently claiming for closer attention to the innovations introduced by them not only in relation to subject matters but also to form'».

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[13] *Ibidem*.

[14] R. Pelan, *Two Irelands: Literary Feminisms North and South*. Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2005, p. 14.

[15] K. O'Regan, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

[16] M.A. Barros del Río, «Nombrar lo innombrable. Mujeres y literatura en Irlanda», in I. Praga Terente (ed.), *La novela irlandesa del siglo xx*, Barcelona, Publicaciones y Promociones Universitarias, 2005, pp. 71-109, cited by A. Pérez Vides, «'The theatre of the family': An Irish approach to gender awareness in Catherine Dunne's fiction». *Odisea*: *Journal of English Studies*, vol. 12 (2011), pp. 183-194, p. 185.

In this discussion, I want to follow Griffin's conception of satiric discourse —that of the «Chicago» theorists of satire— because applying a conventional theory of satire's rhetoric would be inadequate. Conlon's stories need to be tackled from a broader critical perspective which is similar in significance to the nature of her *oeuvre*. The application of Griffin's conception of satiric discourse based on a rhetoric of inquiry, a rhetoric of provocation, a rhetoric of display and a rhetoric of play to the study of Conlon's satiric practice aims at, first, stimulating renewed reading and reflection on her *oeuvre* and, second, clarifying the way the two chosen stories work in the satirical tradition. To carry out this double task, I focus not on the plot or «events» within these two stories, but on her satiric discourse. In other words, I concentrate on Conlon's satire's rhetorical purposes by taking evidence from her characters. In doing so, the analysis tries to make Conlon's readership arrive at a fuller understanding of the way her satire works, and reveal Conlon as a significant rhetorician.

SATIRE AS INQUIRY AND PROVOCATION

According to Griffin[17], «one result of broadening our recognition of satiric forms is to be reminded of satire's immense and perhaps incomprehensible variety». Furthermore, since satire can also be considered «a mode and a procedure rather than a literary kind, then it can appear at any place, at any time». Despite this varied practice, Griffin's unconventional theoretical framework is usefully inclusive. According to him[18],

> Satire typically complicates narrative fiction. If satire is not viewed simply as derisive reduction and rejection, if we broaden our conception [...] to include inquiry and provocation, play and display, anything from Menippean fantasy to learned anatomizing, then we can find satire's mark not just presented in satiric set pieces [...] but woven into the fabric of several different varieties of [writing].

Griffin then provides a number of objections to conventional theories of satire as moral rhetoric. He acknowledges that «satirists, like everybody else, are ambivalent and aware of complexity» and rhetoric «can be, and historically, has been conceived of in quite different terms»[19] than those he uses in his book. However, Griffin also argues that one of the ways in which readers may arrive at a fuller understanding of how satire works is if they think «of a rhetoric of inquiry, a rhetoric of provocation, a rhetoric of display and a rhetoric of play» set. In what follows, I shall attempt to identify satire's mark in Conlon's stories, beginning with the rhetoric of inquiry.

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[17] D. Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction*. Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 1994, p. 3.

[18] *Ibidem*, p. 4.

[19] *Ibidem*.

Satire is designed to be open-ended. As Griffin[20] points out, «The satirist writes in order to discover, to explore, to survey, to attempt to clarify». In fact, it is «the tradition of Menippean satire —with its mixture of prose and verse, its digressions, its mingling of forms, its openness to everything new, [...] that preserves the inquiring impulse»[21]. Accordingly, «the satirical form lends itself to open-ended inquiry rather than to steady progress toward conclusion». Griffin quotes Bakhtin's view of Menippean satire, which presents «a vision of the world» [...] a «testing of that pattern»[22]. As Bakhtin argues, «'The Menippea' does not embody a truth [...] it tests it: the Menippea is a genre of 'ultimate questions', questions asked but not definitely answered»[23].

Several arguments may explain why a rhetoric of inquiry may be useful to better understand Conlon's satiric technique in «The Park». Here, the narrator and her group of liberal friends fear the regressive effect the Pope's visit may have on Irish society. Conlon uses satire to explore a moral problem —how should the Irish people meeting in the Phoenix Park[24] react to the words of a man encouraging them to uphold Catholic tradition? How should some Irish people who, like the main characters of this story, feel themselves to be dissenters from what is intended to be a day of celebration react to the Pope's desire to strengthen Catholic values in the areas of divorce, homosexuality and abortion? Here is Sheena, one of the main characters of «The Park», inquiring about the Pope's impending visit:

> 'It will knock us back years,' [she says] 'Look how much damage he particularly of all the popes has done, in how many years? How long has he been pope now?' [...] Sheena was so concerned at the assumption that we all wanted the pope here she said that something should be done about it. 'We should do something,' she said. [...] All that led to a long discussion about what they would do, what they couldn't do, what they could do and what they dared to do. And so by the end of the meal they had decided to paint slogans, so that people would know that there was some opposition in the country. They believed that to be important. (34-35)

Here, Conlon treats her characters in a largely ironic spirit, while at the same time recognising the moral seriousness behind this group of protestors' anger at the Pope, whom they believe has had a negative influence on the Irish people for his continued opposition to contraception and abortion, amongst other matters. The commitment to inquiry is made by her characters, but the reader feels at the same

[20] *Ibidem*, p. 39.
[21] *Ibidem*, p. 40.
[22] *Ibidem*, p. 41.
[23] M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Ed. C. Emerson. University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 41.
[24] The Phoenix Park is an area of land of around 1752 acres, and is one of the largest enclosed recreational spaces within any European capital city. The Phoenix Park was established in 1662 by the Duke of Ormond, on behalf of King Charles II.

time that, as a satirist, Conlon herself is roused by a sense or urgency about moral ugliness, and the need to oppose it.

Brigid, another female character, carries out another open-ended questioning, and opposition in the story:

> What could those two people be doing? Where could they possibly be going? Mass was in the park by now, wasn't it? The pope had already told the people in icy sharp tones what they must not do, and nor must you, and you must not, and also [...] It would take the people years to recover from the things being said in such a way on such a day. (41)

Brigid's questioning documents the politics of oppression embodied by the Pope's exhortations and the limitations it would place upon women's potential to recast their place within Irish culture. This is precise by what occurred; Pope John Paul II's visit took place in 1986 and some twenty five years later, Heather Ingman[25] was able to confirm that «the Pope's challenge to the Irish people to uphold Catholic traditions did provide an opportunity for right-wing Catholic groups during the 1980s to seek to strengthen Catholic values in the areas of divorce, homosexuality and abortion. Economic recession and high unemployment reinforced conservative attitudes» as well.

Like the effect of the best Renaissance satire, in this story, Conlon is not to reaffirm conventional moral wisdom, but to conduct an open-ended moral inquiry. Here is a very good example of counterargument: «They drove to the park in the early darkness and painted IF MEN GOT PREGNANT CONTRACEPTION AND ABORTION WOULD BE SACRAMENTS on the monument built for the Pope's visit» (43). Building on Bakhtin's claim that «the menippea» is characteristically «dialogic or polyphonic rather than monologic», that it «speaks with more than one voice» as well as on Griffin's[26] previous assumptions, I claim that Conlon's rhetoric, as shown in the two quotations above, is dialogic and a means for detecting error. According to Griffin, «truth will emerge only through rhetorical contest in which arguments and counter-arguments are offered to challenge and discredit an opponent»[27]. Accordingly, Sheena and Brigid are the main protagonists of such rhetorical contest and their arguments reveal their insurgence and opposition to the national ideal. Their open-ended questioning challenges and discredits the stagnant religious principles supported by the Pope and the political beliefs of right-wing Catholic groups[28]. These two women are not alone though; they are helped by some male characters like Macartan as well. Their action is itself the embodiment of the satirical impulse. It is witty, but is at the same time a demand for debate, and a validation of the dialogic impulse. Later,

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[25] H. INGMAN, *op. cit.*, p. 228.
[26] D. GRIFFIN, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-42.
[27] *Ibidem*, p. 43.
[28] It is worth noting this open-ended questioning which is characteristic of Irish women writing at this time.

what appears to be an individual criticism, Macartan's sigh, takes its full meaning from the mutuality of lovemaking: «As a million and more genuflected, creeking their knees within a quarter of a second of each other, Macartan put his feet up on the dashboard and sighed the way some of us do when making love has satisfied us beyond what we think we deserve» (41).

Here, the reader as knower becomes an active participant. Conlon's rhetoric of satire is addressed to engage in a process of transformation, that is, one in which Irish nationalism can no longer create a society that is «rigidly Catholic, censorial, and punitive»[29]. Even though nationalism is still influential in Irish life, the passage of time has shown that church, state, and family no longer dominate Irish lives liberated by economic change, education, and social reforms. Kate O'Regan[30] has developed this aspect of «The Park»:

> The protestors in «The Park», were not exclusively women, there were several men in the group too. The opposition to a closely allied church and state was not just a cause of concern for women, nor was the feminist movement a completely female endeavour. However it lay in the hands of women to assert their new identity, to protest at inequalities and to find a voice which Irish society was willing to listen to.

Regarding the rhetoric of provocation, Griffin[31] explains: «If the rhetoric of inquiry is positive, an explanatory attempt to arrive at truth, the rhetoric of provocation is negative, a critique of false understanding. In each case, the satirist raises questions: «in provocation, the question is designed to expose or demolish a foolish certainty». One obvious way in which satire provokes its reader is in its calculated difficulty. According to Griffin[32], satire does so by «using elliptical syntax, cryptic or abrupt allusiveness, brevity, and roughness of rhythm». However, «a more important kind of provocation than obscurity in satire often takes the form of paradox, an ancient rhetorical form and a favourite device of daring and witty writers from the early Renaissance through the seventeenth century and beyond»[33]. Satire takes the form of provocative paradox either because it seems absurd or because it challenges received opinion.

Conlon too uses abrupt allusiveness to provoke her readers and expose or demolish a foolish certainty. Here, the group of liberals are trying to reach an agreement about where to put the slogans they paint: «'Maynooth,' Macartan said dreamily, turning it on his tongue as a child would repeat a word to itself, knowing that it meant something but not knowing what. 'Maynooth, where the priests are made'» (35). Again, Conlon provokes here because Maynooth is not only a Pontifical University in north County Kildare, Ireland's main Roman Catholic seminary but

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[29] C. Moloney and H. Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 115.
[30] K. O'Regan, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-14.
[31] D. Griffin, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
[32] *Ibidem*, p. 53.
[33] *Ibidem*, p. 54.

also the seat of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference. Furthermore, like Juvenal, Conlon finds the sense of being paradox useful to show shockingly heterodox opinions addressed to show the problem of Irish poverty. Here is an example of this in «The Park» as well:

> Her neighbours were all hanging out upstairs windows, waving yellow and white flags[34] at a speck in the sky that must be your man's helicopter. Brigid lifted the nearest black garment to hand, which happened to be a nightdress, attached it firmly to her window, and got back into bed again, trying to shut out the noises of belligerent piety. (41)

Conlon's form of paradox in the text is provocative not only because it seems absurd, but also because it challenges received opinion. By attaching a black nightdress firmly to her window, Brigid shows her indignation and implicitly denounces the public enthusiasm for the rigid and censorious Catholic institutions. This is challenging too and, in Griffin's sense[35], against the orthodox, but it is not as writing a paradoxical statement. It is in the broad sense satirical and oppositional. The end of the story also shows Conlon's liking for paradox.

> Brigid got caught painting a harmless slogan seven years later, one year after the passing of the statue of limitations.
> «It may be a harmless slogan, your honour, but the vandalism of the papal cross in the park wasn't».
> The judge's eyes widened into white. «Six months», he said.
> I got caught. I had a standby job taking the lottery ticket money in my local shop [...] By an odd coincidence a hundred pounds went missing from the till the same week. Not me, I wouldn't have the nerve.
> «A hundred pounds may not be a lot of money, your honour, but attempting to procure fraudulently eight hundred and sixty thousand, two hundred and ninety-two pounds is».
> «Six months», he said.
> We're getting out next week and Diarmuid is throwing a party for us. (43-44)

By acting provocatively, Brigid not only exposes legal authorities and their *modus operandi*; she also hints at emigration as a recurrent way out of Ireland's oppressive system to America. As Moloney and Thompson[36] correctly point out, «The Park» is a darkly humorous story where Conlon «makes clear the inevitability of escape to America. Emigration is juxtaposed with the ultimate confinement, prison, because those characters who do not» [...] emigrate «are jailed for protesting the constraints of Irish Catholicism».

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[34] This is the Vatican flag and «your man» is the Pope.
[35] D. Griffin, *op. cit.*, p. 53.
[36] C. Moloney and H. Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

So far, I have concentrated on «The Park». In «Birth Certificates» Conlon also uses paradox. She does so not only to make a challenge, but also to exercise her reader's wits. Here is a moment at which the two female protagonists, the journalist Maolíosa, and Miss Regina Clarke whose public function is to help unite young or middle-aged adults with their long-lost mothers, meet for the first time:

> «Call me Regina. [...] Miss Clarke, Miss Regina Clarke», said to Maolíosa, shaking her hand heartily.
> It's like as if she's shaking hands from her nipple out, thought Maolíosa, at the same moment also thinking, what a ridiculous thing to imagine. What made me think of that?
> «Sit down. No here, this seat is more comfortable».
> Maolíosa sat on the edge of it. Regina had a bosom that an eleven-year-old would be absolutely sure to get a peep at. Certainly you should be able to see some of it, say from underneath the short summer sleeve, if she lifted one of her arms up, or definitely if she bent over to get something. God, what's got into me? Maolíosa wondered. Yesterday she had told a friend about a desperate craving for chocolate that had come over her recently. (152)

Conlon uses the rhetoric of provocation in this passage to write about the semi-suppressed sexual nature of Regina's body and she does so in a very skilled manner. She forces the reader to admit that such images are, in fact, out of reach, unavailable to her characters. Conlon's story challenges stereotypes about women because it is the provocative thought that matters. Conlon seems to be suggesting that women were «searching for a gap between the edicts of church and state, where they [...] hoped to preserve the vision of a morally purely Ireland, separate from the practice of private morality»[37]. As Moloney and Thompson[38] observe, Conlon tackles women writing, particularly about sex, and notes «the ironies of traditional Catholicism, prohibiting sexuality for women while mandating motherhood». Paradox serves Conlon here, thus, «as an opportunity for the display of rhetorical ingenuity», «for advancing an unorthodox opinion» and «for stimulating a thinking temper»[39]. As the text goes on, one reads: «Miss Clarke could have been a nurse, although you wouldn't be inclined to think about nipples if you were getting an injection» (153). In my view, Conlon, as a satirist, provokes by making Maolíosa have strange thoughts. As observed, Regina looks strange to Maolíosa. The former replaces orgasms with good works like finding mothers:

> Maolíosa was confident now. Once, when sitting on the desk, she caught herself staring at Regina's V-necked dress. That thing they call a cleavage —it was like a crease, a watershed, the down shape of any single thing thrown in a heap— why was it so breathtaking? It was as if that line was the piercing needle of the body

[37] S. Kilfeather, *op. cit.*, p. 111.
[38] C. Moloney and H. Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
[39] D. Griffin, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

> below. Had Miss Clarke had many, any, orgasms? Regina was judging her this evening, she was sure. Sometimes she was friendly, but sometimes she looked down her nose at Maolíosa, bragging years. Maolíosa was still young enough to hate that. Did Miss Clarke have many orgasms? (161)

As Moloney and Thompson[40] claim, Conlon believes that readers assume women writing about sexuality are speaking autobiographically rather than using their imagination, and consequently censure them. However, Conlon seems to be aware of the fact that these women who have sexual fantasies are there, that they often feel guilty for having them, that they often repress, and that they have to be acknowledged. As Pelan[41] rightly argues:

> Conlon, like most of the other contemporary fiction writers from the Irish Republic, generally portrays quite «normal» women: in other words, now women who can be read as atypical members of their society, thus disallowing readings of the texts as examples of «one off» or aberrant characters. Such a portrayal also forces the question of how many of those existing alongside the protagonist have also internalized their gender/class/national oppression. In doing so, the writers politicize their characters by allowing them to be commentators on their communities from within the community: the «enemy» is no longer an abstraction, «out there», but it is identified in real terms as part of the community itself. This can be seen quite clearly in many of Conlon's early stories [like] «The park»

Here is another example of Conlon's use of imagination and the rhetoric of provocation writing about sexuality: «why did sex make such a different thing of friendship? Oh well, it did, thank God, thank God»[42] (172). Dealing with sexuality in this manner, Conlon's confronts the traditional perception and apparent oppression of Irish women throughout society. Her female characters challenge this silence because sexual emancipation calls for a new identity and a stronger voice. This is why Maolíosa is determined to write this risky article on baby adoption, despite the constant —and apparently unmotivated— discouragement of her boyfriend Cathal, and Regina is ready to help her keep strong and encourage her venture. In doing so, «Birth Certificates» addresses «the issues of sexuality and difference between men and women together with issues of women and literature, and the way their voices and lives are excluded from literature»[43].

Apart from this significant question, Conlon's «Birth Certificates» also tackles the issue of baby adoption. This is Regina speaking: «There's a country full of them [babies] out there, and more again, much more again, outside the country. They mostly come from England now. But I don't meet those ones, they usually know the address by then, unless, of course, the mother has asked me from this end,

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[40] C. Moloney and H. Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
[41] R. Pelan, *op. cit.* (2005), p. 45.
[42] This is not with Regina, but with boyfriend.
[43] C. Moloney and H. Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

which is even dicier. Ah yes. Even dicier» (153-154). At this point, Maolíosa wonders whether Regina wants publicity that she mediates for parents and abandoned offspring to come together again through Malíosa's newspaper.

> Still, if she did tell, if she hinted a do-it-yourself find-your-mother method, then you might have hordes of people looking for their mothers, people turning up after Sunday dinner on unsuspecting doorsteps, mothers who were just about to take a nap, saying, «Wait there a minute», nearly closing the door (you couldn't completely close the door on your own flesh and blood if they were actually standing there in front of you, rather than lying in a cot) and saying, «John», or «Peter», or «Paddy», or «Mick», «Could you come here for a minute there's something I have to tell you». The lucky ones would at least have a separate sitting room in which to drop the bombshell. (160)

With this quotation, I want to provoke the reader and make him realise that Conlon favours the absurd and paradox in this quotation not to moralise, but as rhetorical forms aimed at challenging received opinion and exposing all sorts of human follies like the Catholic Church's booming adoption business in babies of single mothers, and its terrible consequences. In telling this story, Conlon makes her readers *see* what Elkin[44] describes as «the world's enormities and absurdities» in direct visual terms. Just like some of the most well-known satires by Byron or Swift, Conlon's story represents an act of telling uncomfortable truths about the Catholic Church's involvement in the adoption of babies.

To sum up, Conlon regards her targets with an attitude more complex than simple rejection. By using a rhetoric of inquiry and provocation, she may not have answers to all her questions, yet she exercises an overall control over the process of exploration, leading the reader to raise questions he must then ponder. According to Griffin[45], this is exactly the way satiric irony works and why, in his terms, it is «unstable». If it is the case that Conlon's readers are unable to reconstruct her meaning with confidence, a remark by Griffin[46] applies: «Perhaps the inquiry is all, the end in itself, truly open-ended». This may be why characters like Brigid in «The Park» and Maolíosa in «Birth Certificates» reveal a narrator far more interested in bewildering the readership with striking effects than in offering a contemplative moral consideration. In so doing, the «rhetorical appeal becomes a kind of fiction», which «in itself introduces the element of performance and display»[47] in Conlon's fiction. These last two aspects will be analysed in the following section.

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[44] P.K. Elkin, *The Augustan Defence of Satire*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1973, quoted in D. Griffin, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

[45] *Ibidem*, p. 68.

[46] *Ibidem*, p. 69.

[47] *Ibidem*, p. 77.

SATIRE AS PLAY AND DISPLAY

If Conlon's satire is inquiry and provocation in «The Park» and «Birth Certificates», now I want to suggest that the reader needs to think of it also as a kind of rhetorical performance or rhetorical contest; that is, as display and as play. As Griffin[48] states, «satirists implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) ask that we observe and appreciate their *skill*». Conlon often seems to be more concerned to display her wit and rhetorical skill than to persuade an audience to accept her satiric judgements. According to Griffin[49], «that rhetorical appeal becomes a kind of fiction; this in itself introduces the element of performance and display». In using display, Conlon is radically unfolding; by using play she is radically engaging «in some joyous exercise or movement»[50]. When Conlon uses the former it requires an audience; when she uses the latter, that is, play, it can occur without one because what Conlon, as a satirist, displays is her playfulness. As Griffin[51] claims, this is «reserved for self-delighting activity that has no concern for morality or for any real-world consequences save the applause of the spectators.»

In what follows, I shall examine Conlon's playfulness as a kind of play in several distinct, but related senses. The first type of playfulness concerns the largely purposeless or gratuitous verbal play of the type found in «The Park»:

> Apparently my blood pressure is the same as everyone else's, that is, just below boiling point. The fat which, during the last few years, had wrapped itself like a tight hug around my arse, has begun to disappear. Where does fat go when it falls off people? Are there chunks of it floating around the air in the exact spot where people have got thin, and where is the exact spot, and do people breath it in and does it damage their lungs? My nerves are no worse than they ever were, and I sleep well. These things surprise me but they don't surprise Brigid. Nothing surprises her, that's why I love her, and her eyes are grey. (31)

Here, Conlon wishes that we appreciate her skill[52]. The narrator is radically engaging in some joyful activity to emphasize the contrast between the information provided in the first part of the quotation with the intimate confession of the love and admiration that the female narrator expresses for another woman character in the story at the end of this quotation.

A second and different example of playfulness concerns Conlon's play with real people who are transformed into something else when they enter the satiric game. The following excerpt is taken from «Birth Certificates»: «Sometimes Maolíosa looked at Cathal, like now, and noticed different things about him. Look —his

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[48] *Ibidem*, p. 73.
[49] *Ibidem*, p. 75.
[50] *Ibidem*, p. 84.
[51] *Ibidem.*
[52] S. Gaisford, *op. cit.,* notices this trait of Conlon's stories too, when she argues that «Time, for example, is manhandled. We can spend longer on a moment's thought than on the next 10 years of narrative».

moustache, it leaned to one side of his face as if it were a wind-beaten hedge, she'd never noticed that before» (156). Here the narrator ridicules Cathal and the use of caricature turns out a brilliant source of humour. In fact, Conlon's playfulness is deliberately insensitive to the imperfections of Cathal's body and not intended to make us feel comfortable either. In doing so, Conlon not only achieves indirectness in her story, but also mocks the pressure of Cathal's authoritative attitude.

A third example of play is the whimsical insult and invective that is teasing, competitive, or even genial. This can be observed in the following quotations taken from «The Park» and «Birth Certificates». In «The Park» she writes: «And so by the end of the meal they had decided to paint slogans, so that people would know there was some opposition in the country. They believed that to be important. Nothing too drastic like 'Fuck the Pope', because that could be taken up the wrong way, twice» (35). A second example occurs when family and friends make an unwelcome visit: «Look at that big ignorant mouth leaning his dirty arse on Diarmuid's stereo» (40). The third instance of this type of playful insult appears in «Birth Certificates». The narrator says, «The last thing mother and child needed was Maolíosa with her caring and her bloody good will» (165). What these examples of playfulness suggests is a kind of ease and freedom in which moral standards, while assumed, are not allowed to dominate.

A fourth and last type of playfulness consists of the intellectual play of irony and fantasy. Here Brigid shows her concern about the impending visit of the Pope to Ireland in «The Park»:

> So that's what all the flags were for. Brigid wondered to herself where the people had got them. Had they had them all the time in boxes, away with the Christmas decorations, waiting in case the pope ever did come to Ireland? Or was there a factory somewhere spewing them out of machines at a rate of knots? Or did the women sew them up at night in the individual homes and pretend that they had had them all along?
> «Look how much damage he particularly of all the popes has done, in how may years? How long has he been pope now?» (34)

Here, the author becomes playful, creating an amusing fantasy which also has political force. Brigid's discourse is flexible, clever and playfully-minded. In fact, it seems as if she liked to take part in it by making scenes, creating fantasies and identifying herself in whimsical seriousness. In doing so, Conlon shows to be very much interested in delicate playfulness. Having said that, Conlon seems to be far more interested in rhetorical display than in whimsical rhetorical play some other times and, therefore, her denunciations may also be conceived as humorous abuse. Conlon's taste for play of wit is aimed at testing or exploring the idea of a transformed society, one that is no longer as rigidly Catholic, censorial, and punitive as it is the one shown in «The Park» and «Birth Certificates».

According to Griffin[53], there is «another element of playfulness in satire, involving both hostility and competition». This «appears most clearly in the long

[53] D. Griffin, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

tradition of flyting, in which two satirists take turns abusing each other» (88-89). Indeed, this playful emulative abuse can be observed in the dialogues between a couple in Conlon's «Birth Certificates». Here, the string of insults they use is in fact a linked chain, a verbal performance. That the game is in some sense mere «play» is confirmed by what these two characters say when they argue.

Saturday is couples day around Grafton Street, they were everywhere, fighting and kissing. I suppose Maolíosa and Cathal are among them. They won't be fighting now because he got his way. She walked behind a man, woman and child. The man and woman seemed to pursue each other, because although she was a few steps in front of him, her comments seemed to be directed at his back.

> «You are as thick as two short planks».
> Regina thought that a funny thing for a woman dressed like her to say.
> He said, «A small zip on your mouth wouldn't go astray».
> She said, «If you wanted to be an actor, why didn't you join the Abbey?»
> He said, «God preserve me from your ignorance, that's all I ask».
> The child ignored them. It could have slipped away unnoticed. Couples. Regina sniffed, and turned into another street. (173)

Without a doubt, this excerpt constitutes a very good example of clever satire. It is a wit contest, a kind of game in which the two members of the couple do their worst for the pleasure of themselves. This is a game in which the couple attempts to humiliate each other, and yet find a kind of pleasure in their exchanges. As it is the case with Maloíosa, the woman taking part in the exchange evidently feels underappreciated and misunderstood. Conlon's women like the protesters in «The Park» and Maolíosa, the journalist in «Birth Certificates» seem to search for a sense of significance on their own terms either in bed, with two lovers, or by writing about adopted babies, respectively. Conlon writes a type of satire where she makes her characters speak rather than internalise what they think. Although she represents her characters as aggressive at times, Conlon confronts the traditional perception of women and discloses serious issues concerning women in modern-day Ireland like their wish to move towards some type of parity of esteem in Irish life. In this sense, Conlon's playfulness, sardonic treatment of characters, wit and elaborated discourse prove valid techniques for the female writer to achieve her rhetorical and critical purposes.

CONCLUSIONS

Conlon's stories show her liking for formal experimentation, the power of rhetoric and her need to tell. The application of Griffin's theoretical framework based on a rhetoric of inquiry and provocation, and a rhetoric of play and display has usefully illuminated both the broad semantic nature of Conlon's lampoon, but also described the rhetorical means by which she attempts to imagine a process of potential transformation in the lives of men and women in Ireland and to do so without any hint of moralising.

Conlon's repeated questioning, abrupt allusiveness, calculated difficulty, exploitation of complex paradoxes and of the absurd constitute rhetorical devices aimed at inquiring, provoking, challenging received opinion, exposing all sorts of human follies and causing people to be aware of their absurdities. Regarding Conlon's rhetoric of display and playfulness with words or wit, moral ideas, irony and fantasy, insult and invective, they also make the reader have a pleasurable time rather than feel instructed. Indeed, Conlon's short stories reveal that her satire is not only unrestrained, difficult to classify formally and curious and inquiring rather than soluble, but also deeply rooted in history and so, referential. Therefore, her exploitation of satire rhetoric succeeds in rendering the female Irish vision and the female voice in experimental and direct ways in her fiction, yet also relates her to a tradition of high rhetoricians like Juvenal, writers of Menippean satire like Petronius or masters of wit like Donne or Jonson and many others. I hope readers will henceforth find satire present not only in satiric set pieces like Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* or Wyndham Lewis's *The Apes of God*, but also in the streetwise wit of Conlon.

Conlon's stories offer no counsel, but they expose and explore experiences that can be shared. By focusing on topics that are of special interest to the contemporary Irish woman in satiric ways, Conlon offers new perspectives on the topics she deals with, at the same time revising the predominantly realist mode of the Irish short story. By eradicating established perceptions of women, and presenting the reader with a new image of women and Ireland, she paves the way for a more liberal, yet less idealized vision of women in Ireland. Conlon's satiric rhetoric highlights important cultural questions, while situating her own work as a means of asserting the social value of literature. In doing so, the short story provides Conlon a platform to imagine ways in which aspects of Irish society might be changed.