

**GUILT, SHAME AND NARRATION IN JOHN
BOYNE'S *THE HEART'S INVISIBLE FURIES*
CULPA, VERGÜENZA Y NARRACIÓN EN
THE HEART'S INVISIBLE FURIES, DE JOHN BOYNE**

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ALICIA MURO LLORENTE

Universidad de la Rioja

alicia.muro@unirioja.es

<<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8274-3294>>

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Abstract

This article deals with the psychological affects of guilt and shame in John Boyne's novel *The Heart's Invisible Furies* and with how these influence the way in which the narrator, Cyril Avery, chooses to present his life narrative. Being both the narrator and the main character/focalizer of the events told, the question of his (un)reliability proves extremely relevant for the analysis. The guilt and shame Cyril feels in the first part of the novel—which is also the first part of his life—on account of his being a gay man is forced upon him by the Irish society of the time. Hence, it is only when he leaves his homeland that he can start to find the peace he so much longs for and which, eventually, allows him to tell his story.

Keywords: guilt, shame, (un)reliability, Ireland, homosexuality, John Boyne.

Resumen

Este artículo trata sobre las emociones psicológicas de la culpa y la vergüenza en la novela *The Heart's Invisible Furies* de John Boyne, y de cómo estas influyen en la forma en que el narrador, Cyril Avery, elige contar la historia de su vida. Al ser a la vez narrador y protagonista/focalizador de los hechos relatados, la cuestión de su

(no) fiabilidad resulta extremadamente relevante para el análisis. La culpa y la vergüenza que siente Cyril en la primera parte de la novela —que es también la primera parte de su vida— por causa de su homosexualidad son impuestas por la sociedad irlandesa de la época. Por lo tanto, solo tras abandonar su país natal puede empezar a encontrar la paz que tanto anhela y que, finalmente, le permite narrar su historia.

Palabras clave: culpa, vergüenza, (no) fiabilidad, Irlanda, homosexualidad, John Boyne.

1. Introduction

132 After *A History of Loneliness* (2014), his first novel with an Irish setting, John Boyne published *The Heart's Invisible Furies* (2017). This novel can be described as a precise portrayal of a deeply religious 20th-century Irish society, which restricts the freedom of the characters to be who they really are and live shamelessly. The novel depicts the protagonist's long but necessary quest for identity against the oppressive Irish culture of the second half of the twentieth century.

Boyne is just one of the prominent Irish voices who condemn the crimes of the Irish Catholic Church in the twentieth century in their writing.¹ The works of Colm Tóibín, Patrick McCabe or Jennifer Johnston, among others, “made visible in the twentieth century what had been silent and initiated conversations that Irish society had avoided”, such as “the systemic neglect and abuse of children, the suffocating nature of Irish domesticity, and the crippling familial and social silences that perpetuated and tacitly condoned such abuses” (Costello-Sullivan 2018: 12). In this case, John Boyne continues with these conversations in the twenty-first century, adding his own experience and perspective to the sexual issues introduced by previous authors.²

In *The Heart's Invisible Furies*, Boyne portrays the life of an elderly man, Cyril Avery, narrating his life and miseries as a homosexual growing up in Ireland during the second half of the twentieth century, up to the year 2015 when same-sex marriage was legalized by popular vote —making Ireland the first country to do so. The novel begins in 1945 with Cyril's mother, Catherine Goggin, being expelled from her community, for she is to have a child out of wedlock. She consequently goes to Dublin and ends up giving her child in adoption when he is born. Cyril, Catherine's son, is then raised by Charles and Maude Avery. They are an unusual couple who constantly remind Cyril that he is not a real Avery and they show no signs of fondness towards him. At a quite early stage in his life, Cyril

realizes that what he feels for his best friend Julian is not just mere affection but rather a romantic obsession. Years later, and driven by the highly religious Irish society he lives in, Cyril ends up getting married to Alice, Julian's sister. The end of Part One, however, sees Cyril leaving Alice alone at their wedding reception, since he escapes from Ireland after revealing to Julian his feelings for him. Seven years later, Cyril finds himself living in Amsterdam with Bastiaan, his first boyfriend and true love. Thus, Boyne juxtaposes the Irish and Dutch societies by presenting Cyril's life in Amsterdam, as well as the couple's later life in New York City in 1987. It is here that he reencounters his friend Julian, who is dying of AIDS and refuses to let his family know for fear of their thinking he is a homosexual. After Julian's and Bastiaan's deaths, Cyril, who has just learned from Julian that he, Cyril, had fathered a son from his first and only sexual encounter with Alice before they were married, moves back to Dublin and tries to reunite with his family, attempting to atone and have a relationship with his son Liam. The novel ends in 2015, when Ireland accepts same-sex marriage, and Cyril finally experiences the outcome of his country's evolution, after decades of loneliness, exile, guilt, shame, and rejection.

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This article deals first with the psychological affects of guilt and shame in the novel,³ and with how these influence both the way Cyril perceives and understands the things that happen to him and to others in his life from a very early age. It also deals with how these affects influence the way in which Cyril—being the only narrator—chooses to present his life narrative in retrospect. It is my contention that the notion of (un)reliability is a key feature of the novel and, as such, it needs to be thoroughly discussed alongside guilt and shame, mainly to see how these have an impact on (un)reliability, and vice versa. Wayne C. Booth coined the terms 'reliable' and 'unreliable' narrators in his seminal work *The Rhetoric of Fiction* in 1961 (1991: 158-159). However, decades of research after Booth have made clear that there is much more to this narratological figure than meets the eye, mainly the importance of the reader and the different classifications for (un)reliability.⁴ Consequently, terminology such as fallible or untrustworthy narrators, coined by Greta Olson, or the five factors for reliability introduced by Terence Murphy prove equally relevant for the analysis. The aim of this article is to apply these terms and characteristics to the analysis of the narrator and protagonist of *The Heart's Invisible Furies* in order to decide on his (un)reliability and on how this relates to guilt and shame. Cyril, but also other characters in the novel, like his mother Catherine, are victims of their sociocultural context. Their guilt and shame manifest themselves especially in the silences that are imposed on them.

2. “It’s what I haven’t said”: Guilt and Shame in *The Heart’s Invisible Furies*

The psychological affects of guilt and shame prove extremely relevant when discussing Cyril’s (un)reliability as a narrator and character/focalizer. First, guilt is mainly assumed as a feeling of the individual. According to Roy F. Baumeister et al., guilt can be described as “an individual’s unpleasant emotional state associated with possible objections to his or her actions, inaction, circumstances, or intentions” (in O’Keefe 2000: 68). To this, it can be added that those “possible objections” can be aroused by oneself or by an external individual, the former conveying a much stronger feeling than the latter. Indeed, many scholars in the field of psychology agree on the individual and solitary implications of the term guilt, in the sense that it is a much more self-centred feeling than shame or embarrassment can be (O’Keefe 2000; Hacker 2017).

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Guilt is also deeply rooted in religion, especially within the Catholic Church.⁵ The Irish society of the twentieth century was highly religious, to the extent that the Catholic Church ruled in the most important areas, such as education, morality, health, economy, or politics (Inglis 1998: 245; Andersen 2010: 17; Smyth 2012). This is present in the novel, since religion restricts Cyril’s identity to the extent that he feels repressed enough to hide who he is instead of celebrating and embracing his identity. In fact, shame, guilt, and other psychological affects are intimately related to the notion of belonging.⁶ Kaufman argues that “[t]o live with shame is to feel alienated and defeated, never quite good enough to belong” (1996: 24). Since early infancy, Cyril is constantly being reminded of the fact that he does not belong, not even in his own family, let alone in twentieth-century Ireland. This makes him live with shame, as highlighted in the title of the first part of the novel, and thus drives him to feelings of alienation and worthlessness. Indeed, “[t]he need to [...] feel identified with something larger than oneself, can shape the course of one’s life” (Kaufman 1996: 92) —and this is what Cyril tries to do his whole life. For him, shame is inevitably linked to the notion of belonging and identity, for it is precisely his feeling of unacceptance that makes him feel ashamed throughout the greatest part of his life.

The concept of ‘shame’, therefore, is not as inward-looking as the concept of ‘guilt’, since shame is something felt against a background —against a community, in most cases. Shame is related to the terms ‘humiliation’ and ‘foolishness’, since shame implies someone —“a disapproving audience” (Tangney et al. 1996: 1256)— reproaching someone else’s foolishness or stupidity and, therefore, alluding to the latter’s sense of pride, among other things. Compared to guilt, shame requires at least two individuals —one will criticize the behaviour of the

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other. In other words, “shame is a more public emotion, whereas guilt is a more private affair” (Tangney et al. 1996: 1256).

Furthermore, most critics in the field of psychology seem to have reached agreement regarding the difference between shame and guilt in their perception that shame implies that the whole self is bad (*I did something wrong*), whilst guilt refers rather to a wrongdoing of the self (*I did something wrong*) which could be amended (Barrett 1995: 44; Ferguson and Stegge 1995: 176; Mascolo and Fischer 1995: 68; Tangney 1995: 117; Kaufman 1996: 6; Arel 2016: 8, 36; Hacker 2017: 219). In that sense, “shame is associated with withdrawal from social contact. Guilt, on the other hand, is associated with outward movement, aimed at reparation for a wrongdoing” (Barrett 1995: 25-26). Due to this withdrawal, shame has been linked to “the internal experience of the self as undesirable, unattractive, defective, worthless and powerless”, and associated to “being defective or inadequate in some way [...], an experience of the self related to how we think we exist in the minds of others” (Pinto-Gouveia and Matos 2011: 281). Unlike guilt, in which one must deal with a guilty conscience almost on one’s own, in the experience of shame our actions derive from an external perception of ourselves —the importance lies in how others view us, rather than how we view ourselves.

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In *The Heart's Invisible Furies*, guilt and shame are very much related to identity and, consequently, homosexuality.⁷ Drawing on Gershen Kaufman and Lev Raphael’s arguments regarding homosexuality (1996), Jac Brown and Robert Trevethan claim that “[s]elf-acceptance may be influenced if judgmental parents, friends, and the broader heterosexual society provide repeated experiences of disapproval, which could lead to shame becoming internalized” (2010: 268). Veronica Johnson and Mark Yarhouse exemplify this with the conflict of those homosexuals who possess a strong religious identity, and who “admit to conflict between their religion and their attractions and, consequently, feel shame and guilt” (2013: 86). Needless to say, guilt and shame are very much related to the construction of identity, mainly due to the aforementioned feeling of worthlessness. Both affects influence how an individual sees oneself, and also how others view him/her. In this regard, Kaufman describes the feeling of shame as “an inner torment. It is the most poignant experience of the self by the self [...]. Shame is a wound made from the inside, dividing us from both ourselves and others” (1996: 16). Indeed, Cyril is deeply influenced by shame and guilt. These mould his identity to the extent that the Cyril we encounter at the beginning of the novel, marked by the rejection he finds in his homeland, is juxtaposed against his older self, once he has come to terms with who he is and has been able to let go of the shame and guilt that were sinking him.

136 A distinction between internal and external shame can be made here. In this regard, “[e]xternal shame relates to the experience of one’s social presentation”, whereas “[i]nternal shame [...] relates to experiences of the self as devalued in one’s own eyes in a way that is damaging to the self-identity” (Lee et al. 2001: 452). Taking this into account, it can be argued that Cyril suffers from both internal and external shame. Related to the former, this feeling softens as the novel progresses and he is eventually able to embrace his sexuality—for instance, he is able to admit to being gay without worrying about its consequences when living in NYC (Boyne 2017: 434). As for external shame, he is conscious of the repulsion others feel towards him when judging his sexuality—a doctor describes Cyril’s impulses as “disgusting” (Boyne 2017: 253). In this sense, Deborah Lee et al. argue that “[i]t is possible for an individual to recognize he carries traits that are associated with stigma and devaluation from others [...], but the individual himself feels no personal shame about such traits” (2001: 452). This would be true of Cyril at the end of the novel but not at the beginning, since it is only when he leaves Ireland that he manages to accept his identity, despite still being aware of others’ rejection of him. Indeed, there is a clear change from “[y]ears of regret and shame began to overwhelm me” (Boyne 2017: 351), when he has not come out nor left Ireland yet, to “I realized that I was finally happy” (701), which marks the very end of the novel.

Expanding on this, Asier Altuna-García de Salazar argues that there are several types of shame in the first part of the story, namely “individual shame, community shame, institutional shame and national shame” (2020: 21), all of them condensed in several characters. Indeed, not only Cyril but also Catherine, Julian and Alice are victims of shame due to the influence of the doctrines of the Catholic Church in their lives. Julian is a very prominent character during the first part of the novel but becomes estranged until Cyril encounters him again in New York in a completely different situation. Julian’s shame is both individual and national and has the same cause. He feels shame for his condition as an HIV carrier, to the extent of preferring to die alone instead of telling the truth to his family, given that AIDS is something that he and the majority of Irish people at the time attributed to homosexuality. According to Kaufman, “Cultural disgust and shame about homosexuality are being transferred to AIDS and people with AIDS—who are equally repudiated whether or not they are homosexual” (1996: 49).

On the subject of national shame, the novel begins with a powerful and gripping moment when Catherine Goggin is expelled from her hometown, and hence from her own family, because she is expecting a child. The local priest denounces Catherine for her condition in front of the whole parish, beats her, and tells her not to come back again. This relates to Peter Hacker’s analysis of shame: “One is made

an object of contempt and ridicule [...] exposed to the taunts and insults of others [...] subjected to a life of abject misery from which, *in extremis*, the only escape may be suicide or becoming an outcast” (2017: 206, emphasis in original). All these ideas are present in Catherine’s experience, for she is ridiculed and insulted before her community, and she is ultimately expelled and treated as a pariah.

Catherine’s family made this decision of exposing her in order to avoid the shame her condition implied, since “[s]hame is linked to loss of honor, which may be due to one’s own behavior or to the behavior of someone who is bound to one by familial, marital, or tribal links” (Hacker 2017: 206). At that moment, Catherine claims that every head turned her direction, “except for those of my [Cyril’s] grandfather and six uncles, who stared resolutely forward, and my grandmother, who lowered hers now just as my mother raised her own in a see-saw of shame” (Boyne 2017: 7). Studies show that one of the physical signs of shame is blushing and the lowering of the head and eyes (Kaufman 1996: 11, 17; Lee et al. 2001: 453). Therefore, it is quite significant that it is Catherine’s mother the one showing more shame, since for Catherine herself it was a relief to let go of that toxic family and small-town community that restricted her capacities. In fact, she refers to her exile as her “independence” (Boyne 2017: 14). Besides, “her whole face was not scarlet [...] but pale” (7), hence showing Catherine’s lack of a deep sense of shame but rather repulsion towards her world. For Catherine, therefore, this is a moment of community shame rather than individual shame.

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Alice is another character who suffers shame due to the impositions of the Catholic Church. Alice and Catherine show some similar traits in the sense that they are both too rebellious for their time. Alice, like Catherine, is in control of her body and does not obey the church in her sexual behaviour. The first instance of shame she suffers from is being stood up at the altar by her first fiancé Fergus —something that she tries to overcome for many years. Then, she is stood up a second time by Cyril. Alice is once again a shamed woman, for she is now “a married woman with a child and a missing husband” (Boyne 2017: 555) who is unable to remarry —at least in the Ireland of the 1970s and 1980s. Her shame is national and institutional rather than individual, precisely because she is not the stereotypical Irish girl and does not feel she has done anything wrong, but she is made to feel guilty and ashamed by the society around her. Indeed, in all these cases, characters feel ashamed for how they may look to the rest of their community, rather than because they feel they have done something wrong.

Alice’s shame links with Cyril’s sense of guilt for marrying and then abandoning her at their wedding reception. Even if he claims to be ashamed, it could be argued that Cyril feels more guilt than shame, the former being a fault of the whole self and the latter a fault for a particular event. He claims to be “extremely

ashamed of what I did to you [Alice]” (Boyne 2017: 549), and says “I certainly blame myself for the pain I had caused her” (402), but, taking into account the abovementioned theories on shame and guilt, Cyril’s behaviour and attitude bear more resemblance to those suffering from guilt rather than shame. This implies that he feels he has done something wrong which should be amended, as indeed Cyril attempts to do almost at the end of his life. In this way, the whole novel could also be read as Cyril’s confession of his wrongdoings, as an explanation for his actions and an attempt to relieve his guilty subconscious, even if he is not able to identify it as such.⁸

The same goes for his silence towards Julian. Even if Julian is Cyril’s best friend, he is not able to confess his true feelings for him until it is too late. His guilt is born out of his silence, then, since “it’s what I haven’t done. What I haven’t said” (Boyne 2017: 332). In this regard, Altuna-García de Salazar argues that Cyril “grows out of what cannot be said —as it reflects an oppressive outside reality— and has to address the notion of unsayability” (2020: 18). It is at the end of the novel, when his community eventually allows him to be true to himself, that Cyril comes up with an explanation for his wrongdoing:

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I can’t excuse my actions [...] and nor can I atone for what I did to you, but *I am able to look back now, all these years later, and see how my life was always going to reach a moment where I would have to face up to who I was. Who I am.* [...] But on the other hand, my life is my life. And *I am who I am because of what I went through back then.* I couldn’t have behaved any differently, even if I’d wanted to. (Boyne 2017: 549, emphasis added)

This quotation shows the link between identity, guilt, shame and narrative in the novel. Having looked back at his past, Cyril is now able to understand who he is and why his life has taken these twists and turns. His identity is shaped by his actions and silences, by what he does and does not do, hence the narrative of his life story, told in the retrospect, helps him understand who he is and how he has reached the present moment. In order to succeed, his (un)reliability needs to come to the forefront to allow readers to discern whether he is being truthful and evaluate the impact of guilt and shame in his narrative.

3. “She Would Tell me Years Later”: Narration in *The Heart’s Invisible Furies*

As a narrator, Cyril Avery recounts his story in a chronological manner in timespans of seven years, starting some years before he was even born. The contents of his story, then, are presented chronologically (from his pregnant mother to his old age) but it should be borne in mind that the narrator recounts the events from a

present/future perspective. Consequently, what he narrates in the first chapters is probably what he last learns about himself, almost at the end of his life. Thus, a distinction must be made here between *narrator-Cyril*, the experienced self, and *character-Cyril*, the experiencing self. This distinction refers to the two different narrative perspectives we find in the text: the moment when Cyril is more predominantly the narrator at the end of his life, and the instances when Cyril is first and foremost a character in, and focalizer of, his own story, holding only the knowledge he possessed at those moments. This allows Cyril to explore the events of his past from the perspective and knowledge of his old age that, as shall be analysed throughout this section, influence his narrative.

The issue of Cyril's reliability as a narrator is relevant to our analysis since it allows us to understand the presence of the aforementioned affects of guilt and shame in the novel. Before dwelling deeper in this aspect, it should be mentioned that, as James Phelan clarifies, "[r]eliable and unreliable narration are neither binary opposites nor single phenomena but rather broad terms and concepts that each cover a wide range of author-narrator-audience relationships in narrative" (2017: 94). Total reliability (let alone total unreliability), therefore, is impossible to achieve —especially for a first-person narrator. In keeping with this, William F. Riggan notes that a "[f]irst-person narrator is, then, always at least potentially unreliable, in that the narrator, with these human limitations of perception and memory and assessment, may easily have missed, forgotten, or misconstrued certain incidents, words, or motives" (in Murphy 2012: 6). Thus, although some first-person narrators may be close to reaching the 'reliable' end of the spectrum, it is quite impossible for them to achieve full reliability, as is the case of Cyril.

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In order to discuss Cyril's reliability as a narrator, his narrative needs to be analysed against the five factors Terence Murphy has described as a pattern of reliability (2012). When examining F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Murphy distinguishes the following marks of Nick's reliability as a narrator:⁹

Nick's secure speaking location "back home"; his use of the middle or elegant English style; his observer-narrator status; his ethical maturity, which has been secured before the novel commences; and his retrospective re-evaluation of Jay Gatsby as the Aristotelian *anagnorisis* of a marked order narrative. (2012: 13-14)

First, Murphy deals with a narrator speaking 'from home', mainly alluding to a "place that signals his stance of achieved personal freedom, mental stability and ethical rightness" (2012: 14). This may be said to be the case of Cyril Avery, since it is at the end of the novel, when attending his mother's wedding, that he acknowledges being "finally happy" (Boyne 2017: 701). Both his personal life and post-referendum Ireland allow for his deserved happiness and freedom after decades of miseries. As mentioned above, the shame Cyril felt at the beginning of

his life has dimmed by its end, and this is present in the honesty of his narrative. Consequently, narrator-Cyril and character-Cyril merge at this point, from a safe place they can call home.

Second, Murphy discusses the narrator's prose, claiming that "the unmarked style of reliable narration is the elegant or middle style" (2012: 14), and alluding also to "the difficulty of conversing in completely fluent, adequately formed sentences for pages at a time" (14). In Cyril's narrative there are barely any indicators of inaccuracy. His narration is linear and clear, and his prose, following Murphy's distinction, reinforces his reliability. This links to the previous idea of Cyril speaking from home: his narrative allows for truthfulness and clarity because he no longer feels ashamed nor guilty.

The third factor discussed by Murphy, however, cannot be applied to Cyril. In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway is not the protagonist of the narrative; he is not recounting his own life but the lives of the people around him. Murphy claims in this regard that "the first-person narrator's role in the plot is strictly limited" (2012: 15). This not so in *The Heart's Invisible Furies*, since Cyril is both the narrator and the main focalizer of his story. However, it could be argued that this is not a sign of lack of reliability, since it is precisely his retrospective re-evaluation (as shall be discussed in Murphy's fifth factor) which allows him to comprehend and analyse his involvement in the narrative. His perspective of speaking 'from home' enables him to evaluate his narrative almost as if he were an external character.

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Fourthly, critics such as Murphy (2012: 15) or Booth (1991: 176) agree that, in *The Great Gatsby*, Nick could not have been reliable unless confronted with an experience such as that of the First World War. At the moment of his recounting the story, Nick has matured and succeeded in "a significant moral trial" (Murphy 2012: 16), which has meant a transformation "necessary in order for Nick to be in a position to be able to re-evaluate the character of Jay Gatsby" (16). This same reasoning could be applied to Cyril as narrator. Although it would be uncalled-for to compare the First World War to the experience of being a homosexual in Ireland during the second half of the twentieth century, it can be argued that Cyril's life from his childhood onwards has been a constant challenge, resulting in a reinforcement and quickening of his process of maturation. From this perspective, it is easy to trust Cyril in his assertions, for the reader knows that his struggle strengthens his reliability.

Finally, Murphy's fifth factor alludes to Nick's "retrospective re-evaluation of Jay Gatsby at the novel's climax" (2012: 15); in other words, to Nick's capacity to go back to his first impression and portrayal of Gatsby and to mend its faults or insufficiencies. In *The Heart's Invisible Furies*, Cyril also re-evaluates his own

behaviour. It is at the end of the novel that narrator-Cyril admits the mistakes that character-Cyril has made throughout his life, namely the silence he has kept regarding his true self. Cyril understands the difference in perspective between the moment in which he speaks and the moment in which he narrates, that is to say, the difference between character-Cyril's and narrator-Cyril's perspectives. At the end of the novel, he claims: "I look back at my life and I don't understand very much of it. It seems like it would have been so simple now to have been honest with everyone, especially Julian. But it didn't feel like that at the time. Everything was different then, of course" (Boyne 2017: 601). Like Nick, Cyril is able to evaluate his life in retrospect, understanding things he could not understand before and trying to make amends for the mistakes of his past. Drawing on Murphy's study, the mere fact that Cyril is able to re-evaluate his actions is an indicator of his reliability as a narrator.

Thus, Cyril complies with most of the features Murphy's study reveals to be defining of a narrator's reliability —his story is linear, he admits there are certain episodes he did not witness first-hand, and he does not give any reason for the reader to hold him suspect. Yet, as Murphy himself points out, being a first-person narrator prevents him from being fully reliable. For instance, there is a recurring anecdote about the first time Julian and Cyril met which neither of them is completely sure of how it actually happened: Cyril claims that it was Julian who asked him if he wanted to see his penis (Boyne 2017: 74), whereas Julian is constantly declaring that it was the other way round (141, 172). The anecdote is never clarified by the narrator and, as a result, the reader does not get to know who is ultimately telling the truth.

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Apart from this, another important aspect to be taken into account is Cyril's narrative of the things he has not witnessed but has been told, namely by his mother. In the novel, there are constant allusions, especially in the first part, that point towards the role Cyril has as mere external narrator of the events that Catherine focalizes: "The Mass began in the typical fashion, *she told me*" (Boyne 2017: 5, emphasis added); "Her face was not scarlet, *she would tell me years later*, but pale" (7, emphasis added). These extracts reinforce Cyril's reliability precisely because he is emphasizing his recounting something someone else has told him —hence, what might be assessed instead would be Catherine's memory and her reliability as an old woman.

Furthermore, there are some other comments in the novel that allude to the retrospective nature of the narrative and also point out the innocence of character-Cyril and the narrator's choice of not clarifying certain events. For example, retrospection is clear in instances such as the following: "Had I been a little older I would have realized that she was flirting with him and he was flirting right back.

Which, of course, is a little disturbing *in retrospect* considering the fact that he was just a child and she was thirty-four by then” (Boyne 2017: 80, emphasis added). These comments that narrator-Cyril makes from the present/future make clear the perspective of maturity and experience he is writing from, compared to the innocence which is characteristic of his childhood: “‘Bless your pure heart’, he [Julian] said, looking at me as if I was an innocent child” (135).

As suggested by the examples chosen, narrator-Cyril is also selective of the facts and events that he chooses to clarify for the reader and the moments when he leaves the reader alone to do his/her own work in understanding the novel. For instance, Cyril reports his mother’s appreciation of the living situation she found herself in with Jack and Seán thus: “It was no wonder, she told herself, that she heard the most peculiar sounds emerging from there during the nights. The poor boys must have had a terrible time trying to sleep” (Boyne 2017: 35). Since the narrative is told in retrospect, both Catherine and Cyril know that Jack and Seán are a couple, but Cyril as narrator chooses to reproduce Catherine’s impressions as a focalizer and not to clarify things at this point, showing Catherine’s naiveté and maintaining the suspense for some readers.

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It is also remarkable that the first part of the novel abounds in historical inaccuracies and anachronisms. Among other examples, Fidel Castro sends Charles cigars in 1952 (when he was not PM until 1959), Charles reads *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* in 1952 (although the book was not published until 1962), and the “former French President George Pompidou” (Boyne 2017: 129) is mentioned in 1959, even though he was not President until 1969. Mistakes of ten years are just too intrusive to be casual.¹⁰ Although these could be inaccuracies introduced by the characters themselves—as a result of Charles’s or Julian’s bent for showing off (which would be consistent with these characters’ behaviour)—they can also be considered mistakes Cyril makes when remembering those parts of his past (which is also plausible since he is an aged man when he starts narrating his life).

Although there are almost no episodes in the novel in which Cyril denies the accuracy of his memories, it is significant that at the end of the novel he admits to the weakness of his recollections when he says: “The memories, which had always been such a part of my being, had dimmed slightly over the last twelve months. It saddened me that no strong emotions came back to me now” (Boyne 2017: 683). This admission paradoxically emphasizes Cyril’s reliability as a narrator and relates him with what Greta Olson refers to as the narrator’s “fallibility” (2003). For Olson, fallible narrators “make individual mistakes or leave open informational gaps that need to be filled in” (104). These are gullible or innocent narrators, as opposed to untrustworthy narrators, whose “accounts have to be altered in order to make sense of their discrepancies” (104). Seen in this light, Cyril’s knowledge

of his poor memory would make his narrative fallible. It is not Cyril's intention to be inaccurate and deceive the reader, but his mistakes are, at several moments in his life, unavoidable. Hence, Cyril would be as reliable a narrator as he can possibly be, considering his involvement in the narrative and his dimmed memories.

Therefore, taking into account the analysis carried out hitherto, one could argue that Cyril's reliability suggests that he is now able to be truthful, not only to others but mainly to himself. He no longer needs to hide behind something he is not, but is rather capable of admitting the truth about himself. This shows that, at the moment he is narrating his story, he feels neither guilty nor ashamed anymore, as his chronological and reliable narrative demonstrates. All in all, Cyril's narrative allows him to expose the guilt and shame he felt throughout most of his life as an Irish homosexual man in a truthful way, avoiding misrepresentation or unreliability. In order to discern whether he has truly healed from his shame and guilt, an analysis of his narrative has proven necessary, since it can enlighten readers on the truthfulness of his story.

4. Conclusion

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Cyril sees himself as different from the rest of the boys around him and learns from an early age that what he is, a gay man, is wrong according to Irish Catholic standards. Nonetheless, he eventually understands that that is who he is and, therefore, he does not feel guilty once he has managed to accept himself. During his youth, Cyril is forced to find comfort in the arms of strangers in dark alleys, until he flees Ireland and reaches a society that does not judge him. The shame he feels in the first part of the novel (and of his life) is forced upon him by the Irish society of the time, and it is only when he leaves his homeland that he can find the peace he so much longs for. By the end of the novel, however, both Cyril and Ireland have evolved and their perspectives towards sexuality (and homosexuality in particular) blur a lifetime of guilt and shame, resulting in the narrator's capacity for reliability and in the nation's path towards progress. The fact that the narrator can be mostly reliable suggests that he has fought the guilt and shame that were slowing him down and has emerged victorious. It is my contention that, were he still haunted by these affects, he would fall inevitably into unreliability in his narrative, mainly by disguising some events from his past in order to ease his conscience.¹¹

Moreover, the narratological analysis carried out hitherto has shown that (un)reliability in *The Heart's Invisible Furies* is as much a matter of focalization as of narration. The distinction made between *character-Cyril* and *narrator-Cyril* has proved essential when dealing with the analysis of (un)reliability in the novel, since the main struggle comes from the disparity between Cyril as narrator and Cyril as

character/focalizer. He makes constant references to the present moment when he is speaking, thus emphasizing the retrospective nature of his accounts and delaying the revelation of some information he has in the present but did not have in the past. Nevertheless, it can be stated that, as a narrator, he is mainly reliable. His intention is not to deceive because, at the moment from which he is speaking, he has nothing to hide and nothing to be ashamed of. His inaccuracies are mere mistakes due to his fallible memory. Hence, it can be concluded that, as a narrator, Cyril is closer to the reliability end of the spectrum. Yet, he is also an innocent unreliable focalizer, since he is characterized by his misunderstanding of things around him due to his childlike naiveté. His upbringing plays an important role here, since Irish society at the time tabooed everything to do with sexuality, bringing shame and guilt to the forefront. His faults and misunderstandings, therefore, are understandable when seen against his censoring socio-cultural background.

Furthermore, the link between narration and the affects of guilt and shame is to be found in Cyril's need to tell his story in order to heal from or overcome past issues. The narrator of *The Heart's Invisible Furies* uses his narrative as a confession, as a coming to terms with himself, as something necessary to relieve the demons of his past. The development of Cyril's attitude towards guilt and shame is what facilitates the evolution from his unreliability as a character/focalizer to his reliability as a narrator. By the end of the novel—and hence by the time he is writing—he has come to terms with his past and is able to confront it almost without shame, having accepted his guilt. He no longer tries to hide from the reader the most shameful aspects of his past, precisely because his past mistakes were born out of his own lies and silences—and it would not be wise to continue hiding things from the reader. Throughout his life, he has learnt that he needs to be true to himself and others, and so he is forced into reliability, into showing what really happened without leaving anything out. His path towards self-acceptance is the path towards reliability, acknowledging his guilt and shame but leaving them behind.

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Notes

1. Boyne's *A History of Loneliness* also deals with the cover-up of the abuses of the Catholic Church in Ireland.

2. See Colm Tóibín's *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999), for instance.

3. Scholars working on Affect Theory struggle to find a single definition

for the term 'affect', for it varies depending on disciplines and fields (Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 1-2; Figlerowicz 2012: 3). Hence, in this article, 'affect' is treated synonymously with 'emotion' or 'feeling', following other scholars in the field of psychology, such as Gershen Kaufman (1996).

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4. For more information on this aspect, see A. Nünning (1997, 2005, 2008), Phelan and Martin (1999), Olson (2003), Hansen (2005), Heyd (2006), Phelan (2007), and V. Nünning (2015).

5. Narratives of religious guilt (mainly of the relief and unburdening arriving with time and maturity) are more and more common. They mainly emphasise the atmosphere of fear and guilt rooted in Catholic or Christian upbringings. For more on this, see Brown (2017).

6. Some scholars such as Yuval-Davis (2006) or Baumeister and Leary (1995) have linked belonging with “emotional attachment”, with feelings of security and with being “at home” (Yuval-Davis 2006: 197). Further, it has been proposed that “a need to belong is a fundamental human motivation” (Baumeister and Leary 1995: 497), which explains Cyril’s longing for acceptance.

7. Hacker even mentions sexual shame in homosexuality (2017: 216).

8. The aim of the following narratological analysis is to show how reliability allows him to do this.

9. This notwithstanding, there are other critics who analyze Nick’s unreliability in *The Great Gatsby* (see Boyle 1969).

10. In this context, some critics have long condemned Boyne for his lack of research —his “offensive” last novel was almost boycotted (Loneragan 2019), and *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is quite often considered historically inaccurate (Randall 2019)— but on this occasion the mistakes are far too easily verifiable to be mere slips.

11. For instance, this is the case of the narrator in Boyne’s *A History of Loneliness*.

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