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# “Babies Taking Care of Babies”:

Parental Absence and Adolescent Identity in Irish Young Adult Literature

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## Abstract

This article investigates familial life in Irish Young Adult (YA) novels, exploring how parental absence influences the development of adolescent identity. Through close analysis of two standalone novels, *A Swift Pure Cry* (2006) by Siobhan Dowd and *The Gone Book* (2020) by Helena Close, and one series, *The Boys of Tommen* (2018-present) by Chloe Walsh, set between 1984 and 2019, this study explores how Irish writers portray the emotional and developmental consequences of familial disruption. By situating these narratives within broader contexts of social conflict in Ireland, the study considers the use of silence as a narrative strategy and examines themes of found family and adolescent friendship as ways of reimagining the traditional nuclear family model.

Keywords: Young adult literature, parental absence, found family, generational trauma, cultural silence, adolescent identity

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## Introduction

Parental absence in young adult fiction frequently acts as a catalyst for the protagonist's development, with Pádraic Whyte stating that many YA novels open “with some sort of disruption of family dynamics which instigates the adolescent journey to adulthood” (Whyte 74). This is particularly charged in the context of Irish YA literature, where the absence of a parental figure carries deeper resonance, reflecting societal issues such as generational trauma, cultural silence, and the evolving nature of family structures. Matthew Grenby (2008) argues that “the paradox of the family story [...] is that it [...] includes more accounts of family disordering than [...] coherence” (118). Fractures caused by dysfunction, absence, or breakdown reveal these dynamics more accurately than ideals of stability or cohesion. Dowd's *A Swift Pure Cry*, Close's *The Gone Book*, and Walsh's *The Boys of Tommen* reveal how familial instability not only shapes adolescent identity but also reflects broader cultural dynamics in Ireland. These novels depict the coping mechanisms developed amid fractured family dynamics, whether through a single father's internal struggles or physically present but neglectful and abusive parents. Tasked with responsibilities such as raising younger siblings or managing household stability, the adolescents in these novels solely navigate the precarious transition into adulthood.

Adolescents also challenge traditional notions of family by creating alternative kinship networks. Linda Connolly's *The 'Irish' Family* (2014) asserts that the nuclear family “is not just an ideal type, it is an ideal” one that Irish society, through State and Church, felt pressure to conform to (Connolly 71). The observation that the family remains “at the centre of social and political debate in the public sphere” and that various groups still fight to preserve an “ideal form of marriage and family” (Connolly 20) illustrates how traditional conceptions retain cultural dominance. Even amid social change, the persistence of such debates reveals Ireland's reluctance to fully embrace evolving definitions of family. The YA novels discussed portray adolescents consistently failed by this idealised model. Yet rather than erasing historical context, they depict protagonists navigating the social realities of their respective eras while highlighting the formation of found families and friendships, reimagining family beyond the nuclear ideal. Ireland's rapid societal transformations, such as shifts in contraceptive and divorce legislation, are mirrored in these narratives, situating adolescent experiences within broader cultural change. Paul Volponi (2016) writes that his “intention was to hold a mirror up to reality, to show an accurate reflection [...] without moralising or judging”, a view reiterated by Helena Close, “I try to present the reader with viewpoints and events without judging” (Personal Communication 2025). This non-moralising approach allows authors to foreground the emotional and social challenges faced by adolescents, such as parental neglect, trauma, and fractured identity.

Generational trauma and cultural silence continue to shape both characters and national narratives alike, contextualising these stories within Ireland's evolving societal landscape: Matt's unsent letters in *The Gone Book* echo Ireland's reckoning with hidden histories, Shell's isolation in *A Swift Pure Cry* reflects the cultural silence of Ireland, and the neglect and abuse faced by Joey in *The Boys of Tommen* highlights the continued instability of the nuclear family ideal throughout generations. Together, these texts exude a crucial question: has the Irish family truly evolved, or do young people remain shaped by the same cycles of loss, neglect, and fractured

identity their parents endured? Ultimately, they inspire critical engagement with whether Irish YA literature actively seeks to challenge prevailing perceptions of Ireland and contribute to contemporary discourse on family dynamics, adolescent autonomy, and identity formation, or if it ultimately reflects and reinforces the enduring weight of traditional expectations of family.

## 1. “Babies Taking Care of Babies”

In her 1999 study, Nancy Chase outlines the meaning of the term ‘parentification’ as “more complex than simply [...] “filling in” in the absence of the parent. When the child is parentified [...] the long-term effects are considered to be [...] of greater threat to a child’s well-being and development” (x). She notes David Elkind’s term “hurried children” (1981), referring to adolescents who are forced to grow up prematurely, taking on roles they are emotionally and intellectually unprepared for, and absorbing “the stress and tension that come with the territory” (Chase 58). These “hurried children” are expressed as family heroes, who maintain the facade that life is normal when they are outside the walls of their home. They “take on adult obligations such as putting a drunk parent to bed [...] taking care of younger siblings” (Chase 59) or being the primary breadwinner for their families: ““Been on the books since third year [...] Needed the money”” (Walsh 4: 595). This is no pressure an adolescent should ever have to carry.

Concurring with this is Erik Erikson’s *Stages of Psychosocial Development* (1950), which outlines adolescence as a time for exploring identity, rather than experiencing role confusion, and for examining adolescents’ experimentation with values and their place within society. Failure of this stage leads to self-reliance and insecurity. Reflecting these compelling and harsh realities, *A Swift Pure Cry*, *The Gone Book*, and *The Boys of Tommen* explore fractured familial relationships, highlighting how stories centred on family frequently focus on dysfunctional breakdown, rather than harmony. Through the reversal of traditional roles, where adolescents are compelled to protect each other, rather than being offered protection, Dowd, Close, and Walsh reimagine familial structures. The proverb “It takes a village to raise a child” becomes particularly resonant, suggesting that raising a child is not solely a parental responsibility but also entails the support of a community. Implying that children thrive in an environment that offers assistance and guidance, the ‘village’ requires an environment where children's voices are listened to, while ‘villagers’ may provide direct care to the children and support to the parent (Reupert et al. 2). This communal dynamic is exemplified, too, by Adeyanju (2023), who explains that found family as a literary device portrays characters who develop nurturing and supportive bonds amid crisis, “growing as close as kin regardless of actual blood relation” (1). The novels hence underscore both the resilience harboured in “found families” and the emotional consequences that arise when no camaraderie is found.

## 2. Blurring the Lines of Responsibility

The phrase “babies taking care of babies” (Walsh 2: 318) encapsulates the necessity for siblings to take care of one another in unprecedented circumstances, a recurring theme throughout Chloe Walsh’s *The Boys of Tommen*. Set in 2005, the series explores the intricacies and hardships of eighteen-year-old Joey Lynch and his fifteen-year-old sister Shannon. Through depictions of trauma, family dysfunction, and self-destruction, the series explores the importance of found

family and alternative support systems. While their home life is marred by severe abuse at the hands of an alcoholic father and an emotionally distant, equally abused mother, the series characterises the responsibilities placed on adolescents concerning parental absence. Joey's assumed duty to protect Shannon and his three younger siblings, Tadgh, Ollie, and Sean, traps him in a cycle of violence and emotional strain, leading him to find comfort in addiction; "From as far back as I could remember, I had a job [...] protecting my sister [...] More babies arrived, the hits came harder, and my mother's presence in my life grew fainter" (Walsh 3: 759). As he attempts to maintain a sense of normalcy, much like the "family heroes, whose role is to bring order and balance to a dysfunctional household by [...] proving to the world that everything is normal at home" (Chase 58), the series offers a heart-wrenching portrayal of sibling sacrifice and unbalanced responsibility, showcasing how identity is forged and forgotten in the absence of a loving home, exemplifying the concept of 'parentification', as described by Chase (x):

"Sean pissed the bed again."

Joey sighed wearily. "I better go-"

"I sorted it," Tadgh cut in. "It's done."

My heart broke.

Babies taking care of babies. (Walsh 2: 318)

The phrase thus suggests an inversion of the typical roles within the home and exemplifies the dismissal of personal desires and identity. Tadgh's statement, "It's done", attempts to downplay the gravity of the situation, yet simultaneously reflects upon the very essence of the situation, as the eleven-year-old assumes Joey's typical duty, amplifying the concept of role confusion. The result is a profound emotional toll, accelerating their transition into adulthood, stunting and shaping identity formation irrevocably. As Whyte states, "The teenage years are seen as a time of struggle [...] to develop independence, to challenge authority, to form an identity" (71), but, disrupted by parental absence, they are denied the space to navigate the crucial developmental experiences previously outlined by Erikson. Reflecting the traditional Irish family model, where children often sacrificed play and autonomy for domestic or farm duties (Gray et al. 66), the novels discussed blur the line between helping and full responsibility. This highlights how a loss of leisure can lead to a loss of self, as these adolescents are consumed by survival and caregiving, resulting in a shift from collaboration to a collapse of boundaries. Shell, for instance, has "no time for church: not since Mam's death" (Dowd 4), and ponders how "there was never enough time these days to walk the three miles down to the strand" (Dowd 57).

In *A Swift Pure Cry*, Siobhan Dowd offers a meticulously crafted and passionate work, exploring adolescent erasure through the intricacies and tenderness of fifteen-year-old Shell, whom Jamila Gavin (2006) describes as "bewildered and bereaved, accepting yet rebelling". Reflecting the emotional liminality of adolescence, the narrative serves as a meditation on identity and social silence in rural Ireland. Set in 1984 in Coolbar, the story follows Shell as she cares for her younger siblings, Jimmy and Trix, while her father, consumed by grief and alcohol, withdraws after her mother's passing. As Shell embraces her caregiving responsibilities, she

seeks comfort in her friendships with Declan and Bridie. However, when they simultaneously vanish, Shell finds herself alone and facing an unexpected pregnancy in a town consumed by the Church's inherent silence. Dowd navigates these themes with a deft touch, offering readers a glimpse into the lives of characters who grapple with the complexities of their existence, crafting a coming-of-age story that critiques societal attitudes and interrogates adolescent identity in the presence of adult failings.

At times, Shell's forced maturity is painfully poignant, particularly when she finds Jimmy has fallen ill from an infection. The passage reveals her deep sense of guilt and self-critical notions associated with the inability to forge an identity as outlined by Erikson. In failing to notice Jimmy's illness, Shell outlines the belief that she is responsible for his well-being, with a lack of regard for her own: "He's been running a fever [...] Did you not notice?" Shell seeks reassurance from Dr. Fallon, asking if she has done the right thing in calling for him, yet once she realises that she did not see the signs, she equates her inability to care for her siblings as a moral failure, rather than a responsibility far too grand for a girl of her age, and resorts to asking Jesus to forgive her for her "lack of loving." Contrasting her staggering distress and Dr. Fallon's reassurance, "You weren't to know, Shell", demonstrates an awareness of her position within her family. However, the doctor's reaction to her father, passed out in his room, wrinkling his nose in disdain and saying, "I see", implies that Shell's neglect of Jimmy is not due to personal failure but rather a result of her father's negligence. The doctor's softened tone toward Shell highlights an understanding that she does not have the means to fulfil this role, further exemplified as she abandons her youth: "She told Dad one day she'd finished with school; he nodded, as if he understood" (Dowd 161). Shell's premature burden of responsibility, which she cannot manage without self-assurance or maturity, becomes evident in her reaction to Jimmy's illness. At the same time, Dr. Fallon's quiet but pointed response to her father exposes the true source of her hardship: the absence of an adequate parental figure (Dowd 74).

Helena Close's *The Gone Book* extends these themes through the resentment and anger channelled by 17-year-old Matt after his mother's abandonment. A series of unsent letters, filled with unresolved longing and confusion, represents his ongoing grief. The novel, set in 2019, explores cycles of addiction from drugs to his father's fixation with exercise: "You'd swear he was getting paid for it" (Close 12), a representation of the ways people fill emotional voids. Matt's fragile bonds with his siblings, Jamie and Conor, and his closest friend Mikey, become central to the narrative. Highlighting how relationships in the absence of parental support can be both grounding and emotionally taxing, Matt struggles with trust, displaying self-destructive tendencies. Close tackles these topics in a way that is raw and unfiltered, offering tangible insight into a world where responsibilities and emotions lie unbalanced. Much like Joey and Shell, Matt, too, carries the expectation that sibling responsibility overrides that of the parent, "'Someone will need to stay with Conor.' [...] 'He's your child' [...] 'He's your brother'" (Close 106). This insistence on sibling care as a substitute for parental responsibility underscores the recurring theme of blurred responsibility, exposing the heavy burden of caregiving and the effects of inadequate parenting.

Despite their unique circumstances, these adolescents are united by a common thread. Walsh and Dowd present unflinching depictions of Irish family dynamics, wherein adolescents are forced to fill the emotional and physical voids left by their parents. They illustrate how parentification and neglect distort the process of identity formation; Shell's guilt and Joey's self-destruction are not presented as personal failures, but rather the natural outcomes of systemic and familial dysfunction. Close adopts a more observational approach, offering dysfunction as a condition of contemporary life: "I don't see it as a critique [...] Modern-day society is made up of all kinds of families" (Personal Communication 2025). Rather than issuing overt judgment, her work foregrounds the emotional consequences of neglect and systemic failings, allowing the reader to infer critique through the raw emotional realities she portrays. By showcasing children taking care of children, these texts reclaim youth narratives from romanticised innocence and exploration to urgent and realistic frameworks of survival. The emotional landscapes they render, whether through Joey's trauma, Shell's guilt, or Matt's quiet rage, implicitly question the societal and familial structures that demand sacrifice. Centring family dynamics in these novels interrogates not who is missing, but rather the inability of those who are present to assist in substantial adolescent development, exposing the broader failure of systems set up to support young people.

### 3. "It Takes a Village to Raise a Child"

The proverb "It takes a village to raise a child" allows for exploration of alternative systems of care as vital mechanisms of resilience and emotional survival. This reflects the belief that social connections are essential for individuals' development, and without them, receiving emotional, intellectual, and moral support is challenging. Bagwell and Schmidt (2011) state that, "the role of parent is obviously a naturally occurring one that provides access to children [...] over an extended period" (55). Subsequently, when adults fail to fulfil their expected roles as caregivers, support is found externally, or in what is commonly referred to as the 'found family' trope. Costello (2023) states that within these relationships, adolescents can learn to give and receive support. Investigating these adolescents and their varying degrees of friendship and isolation can provide insights into their identity formation, as "a significant proportion of teens' learning about supportive relationships takes place with friends" (Costello 389).

The concept of the found family, then, challenges the traditional nuclear family model, aligning with contemporary discussions surrounding diverse family dynamics. Bagwell and Schmidt further explore the long-term effects of absent parents on the ability to find trust and support in others, suggesting that the "parent as a primary attachment figure is developmentally appropriate and [...] contributes to higher-quality friendships" (Bagwell and Schmidt 135). The ability of the adolescent to form and maintain friendships is ever-changing, allowing observation into how support from friends can compare and contrast with the support from siblings, parents, or other adult figures (230). The importance of the 'village' can be recognised through patterns of Matt's voluntary isolation, Shell's inability to recognise mistreatment, or Joey's contradiction of Bagwell's claim of what contributes to higher-quality friendships.

Shell's desire for connection pushes her to seek comfort from Declan and Bridie, despite the unkindness she experiences from them: "He didn't seem to notice she'd been crying" (Dowd

106). This drive for companionship is overruled by her view of mistreatment, which reflects not just youthful naivety but also the deeper effects of growing up without parental guidance. Even when Bridie strikes her, Shell tells Father Rose that they are “friends really” (Dowd 54). This is echoed by Coleman (2011), who notes, “The characteristics that young people bring to [...] friendship [...] will have their basis in what has been learnt in the home [...] with parental behaviour having an impact on the way young people manage their peer relationships” (183). It is ultimately an epiphany that her father is aware of her situation, which underscores her isolation and highlights his failure to provide guidance, “Dad? Everything? So he's known all along?” Her father’s distant and detached demeanour, depicted through his distant gazes, “staring at her, then at the floor, frowning” (Dowd 216), further underscores his inadequacies as a guardian. Rather than extending guidance, he allows Shell to confront her challenges alone, emphasising the profound emotional neglect that subjects her to manipulation, mistreatment, and a misguided pursuit of belonging. This, too, is compounded by her community’s silence. On many subsequent occasions, the people of Coolbar turn a blind eye towards her struggle to keep the pregnancy contained: “She borrowed his rain mac whenever she went out”, with Miss Donoghue’s brief stare, “once when the weather was fine” (Dowd 169), the only acknowledgement of her struggle. It is only after the birth of her stillborn child that her community acknowledges her experience and labels her as “A bad influence on [...] everyone in Coolbar” (Dowd 287). Her identity becomes defined not merely by her actions but also by societal judgment and scapegoating. As Costello notes, this lack of communal support isolates adolescents at a time when peer and adult relationships should offer refuge (389).

*The Boys of Tommen*, then, reflects Close’s statement that “having two parents is not indicative of a functioning family unit” (Personal Communication 2025) by underscoring the detrimental effects of abusive and neglectful parenting when suffering is frequently disregarded by onlookers. This is exemplified by Joey’s descent into addiction: “the bit of grass he smokes...” “Don’t be so fucking naïve, Tony. The lad’s a full-blown drug addict” (Walsh 4: 472). Nevertheless, it also highlights the beneficial outcomes that can stem from the involvement of a supportive network. Bagwell and Schmidt assert that parental presence enhances the quality of friendships; however, Joey and Shannon challenge this assertion as they find solace in their friendships, despite their abusive home; “Myself and Shannon have each other [...] That’s it.” “You have me” (Walsh 3: 201).

In circumstances such as Joey’s, the burden may be sufficiently alleviated to facilitate healing, thereby highlighting the notion of the ‘ideal’ family and emphasising the role of the ‘village’. Abandoning perpetuating themes of neglect and silence, Joey’s ‘village’ actively supports and nurtures. Much like Reupert et al.’s discourse on the composition of the ‘village’, the series relieves its adolescents of undue responsibility: “Feeling weirdly liberated having adults finally listen to my worries and take me seriously” (Walsh 4: 681), reflecting the assertion that the ‘village’ acknowledges children’s concerns (Reupert et al. 3). The most significant contributors to Joey’s alleviation are the Kavanaghs, who provide care for the Lynch children following the death of their parents. This transformation not only establishes a secure home for his siblings, where they acquire the means to develop and express their identities, but also liberates Joey from the burdens that overwhelm him: “Maybe it’s time to rest those feet and let

someone else carry the load for you?” “Let me help you. Let me save you, Joey” (Walsh 4: 685). Thus, while the novel critiques the failures of the nuclear family, it simultaneously underscores the impact of the support system and the ability to grow after trauma has been endured. This dual portrayal enhances themes of found family and resilience, reinforcing the impact of a true ‘village’.

Matt’s intense rejection of emotional support and the nurturing role of a ‘village’ opposes Shell’s experience and serves as a juxtaposition to Joey. Matt’s detachment transcends mere social withdrawal, embodying a refusal, or an inability, to trust or maintain relationships. Although this behaviour may not always be purposeful, it distances him from those who seek to support him. This emotional solitude, stemming from his mother’s early betrayal, has permanently hindered his ability to build intimate relationships; those meant to protect him have caused him pain. For Matt, extreme isolation transitions from being merely preferable to an alleviation of trepidation. The bitterness and defensiveness that often centre Matt’s interactions, particularly with his friend Mikey, are powerfully expressed: “I [Mikey] should never have come in the first place. You’re just too cool for me now—too cool by a fucking mile” (Close: 175). Mikey’s pain and sense of betrayal clarify the harmful effects of Matt’s internalised rejection. Consequently, Matt’s desire to withdraw is a defensive strategy: anticipating rejection, he chooses to retreat before it occurs. To Matt, the ‘village’ feels neither safe nor supportive, but rather emotionally unstable, echoed in Mikey’s mother’s confrontation: “I know the most important version, [...] their faces – the fucking pain in their faces – and now you’ve the cheek to want them back?” (Close: 221). This further aligns with Bagwell’s assertion that a parent who serves as a stable primary attachment figure assists in developing stronger friendships, as Matt’s distancing from relationships is not just avoidance but also a thoughtful, albeit tragic, response to familial breakdown.

The premature adultification of adolescents across these novels and the emotional and developmental consequences of absent and dysfunctional parenting are abundantly clear. In the portrayal of adolescents shouldering immense responsibility, parentification and role confusion are indeed evident. Whether framed through explicit critique or observational realism, these texts collectively interrogate the societal and familial systems that fail young adults. Central to this is the shifting perceptions of the family unit in Ireland, and the rejection of the nuclear model for more contemporary modes such as the found family. In this exploration, these narratives not only expose the emotional toll of uneven caregiving but also gesture toward the capacity for adolescent resilience and self-definition in the absence of these traditional support models. These examples of fractured familial structures are not isolated but deeply rooted in broader socio-cultural patterns within Irish society, such as the encouragement of silence over action and the generational trauma that fuels parental anxieties.

#### 4. “A Well of Silence”

In her work, *The Politics of Irish Memory* (2011), Emilie Pine investigates the phenomenon of the “anti-nostalgic Irish memoir,” positing that this literary genre portrays adolescence through challenging experiences while simultaneously illuminating the avenues for escape (Pine, 63). This critical perspective mirrors the cultural transformations in Ireland from 1984 to 2019. Pine

articulates that silence, arising from institutional abuse and the pervasive influence of the Catholic Church, functions as both a mechanism of survival and a means of state control. Despite substantial societal changes, these silences persist in both reality and fiction.

Ireland's historical narrative, shaped by Church-related conflicts and contentious debates concerning contraception and divorce, has contributed to the development of a pervasive culture of silence, one that Manon Roux (2023) describes as "so systematic that it can be considered a staple of Irish culture" (Roux: 5). This culture of silence coexists with generational trauma, described by Jane Mulcahy as the transmission of negative experiences through parenting, detrimental coping mechanisms, and genetic expression (32). These complexities of intergenerational trauma are explored through *A Swift Pure Cry*'s critique of the Catholic Church and discussion of the ramifications of single motherhood in the context of state austerity (Coghlan: 55). *The Gone Book* and *The Boys of Tommen* embody a broader cultural shift in Irish literature toward confronting fear and misunderstanding around religious practices, a shift that Peter Hunt (2005) observes as a prominent presentation of "humanistic, non-redemptory values" in children's literature (295). These narratives epitomise adult anxieties and adults' consequent silence, as parents harbour fears that children might replicate past mistakes, or resort to stifling silence, avoiding uncomfortable conversation, and hence failing to confront significant issues. This is emphasised by Patricia Kennon, who states representations of youth frequently reflect adult aspirations, fears, and endeavours to navigate their "radical potential" (132). While these novels critique adult failures and challenge the assumption that abused children inevitably become abusive parents (Egeland 1080), they also interrogate the cultural constructions of youth shaped by adult expectations. The silences within these texts carry significant meaning, revealing how "silences can speak" (McGarrity et al. ix); they not only signal trauma but also compel readers to attend to what remains unspoken.

## 5. The Quietness of Irish Culture

Silence, then, becomes far more significant than an absence of speech and manifests as a response to trauma and a cause for fear. Central to this is the suggestion that the depiction of quietness in these novels mirrors and critiques society's general inclination towards silence. Additionally, instances where silence is shattered hold importance, indicating a vision or hope for an Ireland where expression triumphs over compliance, both through fiction and reality. Drawing an invisible line in society where people see but do not speak is highly prevalent in discussing the Lynch family's years of abuse. This, too, occurs regarding Shell's pregnancy: "the neighbours gossip and speculate over support" (Bush). This silence carries itself throughout the novel; the pervasive and stifling silence of Shell's pregnancy, even in the birth itself, reflects the suppressive nature of such quiet: "The thundering silence of the cry that never came" (Dowd 210).

In *The Gone Book*, however, silence serves as an escape for issues Matt does not want to face, a further cause for his self-isolation: "they're all tumbling back into the caravan as if they'd heard me thinking about how good it felt to be alone" (Close 206). Rather than finding solace in companionship, Matt perceives it as an invasion of his personal space, feeling suffocated in the presence of others. While he expresses that the silence in his home makes him want to scream

(Close 9), he further uses it as a method to protect himself: “I say nothing, hoping my silence will stop the rant dead in its tracks” (Close 118). McGarrity suggests that silence of this nature can function as a powerful act of resistance against societal expectations, claiming “Silence [...] may emerge as the most effective ‘sabotage’ against normative discourses that [...] ask us to conform, functioning as [...] a strategic dismissal of the pressure for explanation” (McGarrity 4). In refusing to explain or justify himself, Matt’s silence becomes a strategic tool, rejecting society’s demand for conformity and allowing a sense of autonomy. This suggests that adolescent identity is not only expressed by action or speech but also through deliberate quiet. In asserting this control, Matt’s silence becomes a means of reshaping power dynamics, challenging the unfair responsibilities placed on him. This struggle with the complexities of silence contrasts yet echoes Shannon in *The Boys of Tommen*, as she revels in the comfortable silence of her boyfriend, Johnny’s home:

No screaming voices.

No stomping footsteps.

No rattling door handles.

[....]

Just peace. (Walsh 1: 544)

This moment contrasts with Shannon’s usual sense of safety, as silence in her home is oppressive; it breeds fear and confusion, with her questioning, “‘They’re not shouting,’ [...] ‘Why aren’t they shouting?’” (Walsh 2: 609). Silence here has a dual significance: at home, it signifies danger, yet outside, it becomes a means of survival. Although the siblings recognise the injustice in their abusive environment, they rely on society’s silence to stay together and avoid the care system: ‘It’s not right what happens in this house’ (Walsh 4: 201). For them, breaking this boundary appears threatening and endangers their survival, “‘Talk to the Gards and we’re done’” (Walsh 3: 475). Joey’s silence and refusal to discuss their abuse echoes Elkind’s ‘hurried children,’ as he tries to play the hero and maintain the illusion that their life is ordinary (Chase: 59). Yet, when given an opportunity for liberation, Joey finds solace in speech: “She wanted words. Well, she could have them” (Walsh 4, 783). This stark contrast between the suffocating and freeing aspects of silence highlights its complex duality: it is both oppressive and a form of self-preservation, ultimately marking silence as an act of agency and control.

Similarly, when Father Rose proposes involving the authorities in Shell’s situation: “‘I’d have the social services onto them.’ [...] ‘That kind of talk may go down all right where you come from, but not here’” (Dowd 57), he is pressured not into silence alone but into compliance with the culture that prioritises loyalty over intervention. This exchange illustrates what Roux describes as the way “stories [...] open new avenues to the use of silence as a trope in relation [...] to Ireland’s cultural history” (7). In *Coolbar*, the command to “‘look after our own’” (Dowd 57) does not simply ask Father Rose to remain quiet; it demands that he uphold the community’s unwritten rules by accepting their silence as his own. Here, silence becomes a

mechanism of social control, while compliance marks a deeper form of complicity, one that reinforces the community's resistance to outside scrutiny.

The statement “we look after our own” further functions as a total paradox of Shell's reality, magnifying the belief that silence is a means of survival. This reflects the legacy of Ireland's “habituated silences,” as McGarrity notes, in which silence was not merely a cultural habit but also a sign of power that required no justification: “where once the very fact of power was all the articulation it required” (McGarrity 12). In the wake of real-life events such as the death of Ann Lovett and the Kerry Babies case in 1984, silence, once equated with moral authority and protection, began to be reinterpreted as complicity and suppression. Michel Foucault reinforces this idea, noting that “silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions” (Foucault 86).

*A Woman to Blame* (2010) by Nell McCafferty reports that, in 1983, County Kerry's pro-life vote was fifty per cent higher than votes cast countrywide. On the surface, this seemed a testament to the county's moral conviction. Yet rather than assuming moral conviction, McCafferty situates this stance within Kerry's long history of religious obedience and cultural loyalty: “Behind them lay a long tradition of obedience to the faith and sacrifice and martyrdom to its cause” (McCafferty 51). The tragedies marked “a turning point in the relationship between the state [...] and the concept of the Irish family” (Earner-Byrne 271), with the county of Kerry serving as just one part of a country stuck in support of the Church over the rights of women. This illuminates Shell's unawareness surrounding safe sex and contraception, as “Dowd seems to suggest that it is not simply the church that has failed the teenager, but it is the Irish society in general” (Whyte 79). Her inability to learn about sexual health serves as a stark contrast to Joey's girlfriend, Aoife, in *The Boys of Tommen*. The alteration, over only 21 years from 1984 to 2005, is harrowing. As Aoife falls pregnant at only 18, she is fully aware of contraceptive measures, ““I was sick for hours [...] It must have messed with my birth control”” (Walsh 4: 389) and is pressured by Joey's family to be ““put [...] on a boat to England”” (Walsh 4: 430). Ms Kavanagh embodies this privilege of contraceptive awareness, as she encourages Shannon to take preventative measures against the same fate, ““I need to make sure that you're protecting yourself”” (Walsh 2: 707). The absence of taboo in this exchange juxtaposes Shell's experience, shaped by a socio-historical context where resources were unattainable and unspoken of. As Whyte observes, “The author represents the difficulties that many young people faced during the period in accessing [...] information on sexuality and health” (Whyte 79).

As social attitudes changed throughout these decades, silences, both in Ireland and within the novels, came to be understood not merely as cultural habits but as mechanisms of suppression and harm. This itself suggests Dowd's criticism is not just of the parents of the adolescents, but of a society that failed to protect the lives of young people. Father Rose and Dr. Fallon act as moral outliers in this silent community. Rose's eventual sabbatical reflects his inner conflict: ““I've not seen the image of God like I'm supposed to. I've seen something brittle”” (Dowd 332), signalling a movement away from unquestioned loyalty toward the desire for moral accountability.

Dr. Fallon, though superficially helpful, fails to act meaningfully on Shell's behalf, ultimately mirroring her father's passivity, and the community's broader inaction; his failure to intervene meaningfully reinforces the novel's critique of society that perpetuates cycles of silence and neglect, emphasising that silence is indeed so persistent in Irish culture that we can call it a "trope" (Roux 5).

## 6. Transcendental Fears

Considering the way silence operates within these narratives, it becomes clear that many parents fear their children may encounter struggles similar to their own. This fear often translates into a reluctance to let adolescents make mistakes or participate in experiences typically associated with youth, as well as into an avoidance of conversations about topics they find emotionally difficult or personally painful to confront. As Egeland (1988) notes, some parents who have endured turbulent childhoods disconnect from their past to the extent that they struggle to recognise how it shapes their parenting; they may perceive their children in negative terms and lack the emotional awareness necessary for healthy relationships (1087). What distinguishes the YA protagonists in these novels is not an explicit effort to refute the idea that "abused children grow up to be abusing parents" (Egeland 1080), but rather their attempt to break inherited patterns of silence and to understand the emotional legacies shaping their lives. Through naming, witnessing, and confronting the trauma that surrounds them, they seek possibilities for futures not determined by the pain of previous generations.

The *Gone Book* serves as a poignant illustration of how adult anxieties, rooted in the desire for control and a fear of failure, can adversely affect the lives of adolescents. As depicted in the dynamic between Matt and his father, *Close* illustrates a profound loss of control. Matt's father's compulsion to impose his worldview and beliefs is manifested in his overbearing yet emotionally detached demeanour, ultimately propelling Matt to rebel against his misguided attempts to regulate his superficial attributes; "He has a thing about ponytails on fellas [...] So that's what I'm doing now. Putting my hair up in a ponytail" (*Close* 11). This moment encapsulates how parental anxieties can create a rift between parent and child; as the parents strive to shape the child's identity, they inadvertently undermine the trust and comfort that are vital to their relationships.

Walsh's *The Boys of Tommen* exemplifies the manifestation of parental anxieties transforming into a desire for control in prominent ways. Joey and Shannon's parents directly and explicitly articulate their fears regarding the potential outcomes for their children, blurring the lines between ill and good intent: "'You're just like me, boy. You'll do more harm than good'" (Walsh 4: 767). Joey's father instils a profound sense of fear within him, suggesting that his fate is predetermined. This fatalistic perspective adversely affects Joey's identity formation, compelling him to question his ability to escape the cycle of abuse, despite the positive qualities his siblings and 'village' frequently admire in him: "'You've been one hell of a father, Joey Lynch'" (Walsh 4: 681). Meanwhile, their mother instils fears in Shannon, imposing her regrets disguised as protection. Her words transcend mere cautionary tales, revealing a projection of her unresolved trauma. Remaining rooted in 1980s Ireland, when she fell pregnant at fifteen, she perceives Shannon's relationship as a reflection of this mistake, attempting to persuade her that

she will inevitably fall into the same cycle. Her reluctance to discuss contraception and promote a safe relationship for her daughter, confined by the cultural and moral constraints of her past, illustrates the generational silence she embodies:

“Look where boys like that get girls like us [...] he'll blame you for everything [...] Repeat my mistakes, Shannon, and that boy will [...] break you until there's nothing of you left to hurt.”

"I'm not you," I choked out. "And he's not Dad."

"Yet," she replied sadly. "Not yet." (Walsh 2: 93)

Joey and Shell's ability to overcome this struggle emphasises their radical potential, while these combined interactions highlight the central tensions of adult anxieties in YA fiction, presenting a nuanced exploration of how parental fears, though sometimes rooted in love and concern, inadvertently place burden and trauma on adolescents. This coincides with Egeland's conclusion that "parents' childhood relationships tap an important source of variance in parental behaviour" (1086). Shell's isolation serves as a poignant example: "I'm on my own, apart from Trix and Jimmy, she thought. We three. We're in this together" (Dowd: 185). This becomes a quiet declaration of survival, crystallising Shell's forced maturity. It is not just a reflection of her reality, but also a tragic summary of the failure of every adult around her. Dowd's portrayal reveals how adult ignorance, whether rooted in grief, fear, or morality, too often translates into neglect and complicity.

Ultimately, the protagonists' struggles illustrate how deeply fear, avoidance, and projection can shape a young person's future. Combined, these texts expose the cyclical nature of trauma and emotional inheritance, as adolescents attempt to reject fatalist notions through subtle acts of defiance, emotional growth, and the forging of alternate support systems. In doing so, they not only embody "radical potential" but also assert agency and personify resilience. Examining this interplay between silence, intergenerational trauma, and parental anxieties, it becomes evident that these narratives reflect broader cultural struggles within Ireland's evolving landscape. Silence, in its many forms, is not merely the absence of speech but a force that dictates survival, power dynamics, and personal agency. Whether imposed as a means of control, wielded as a form of resistance, or internalised as a coping mechanism, it shapes the lives of the young protagonists who struggle to define themselves against the burdens of the past. Additionally, parental anxieties, rooted in both fear and love, become a defining force in these texts, demonstrating how cycles of trauma persist but also how they can be broken. These novels ultimately challenge the idea that young people are doomed to repeat the mistakes of previous generations, instead showcasing their resilience and capacity for change. In doing so, they critique adult shortcomings while celebrating the radical potential of youth to carve out new futures beyond the constraints of silence and inherited fear, as Egeland states, "change is possible with intervention" (1087).

## Conclusion

Irish Young Adult literature engages deeply with the persistent echoes of cultural silence and intergenerational trauma. Through close readings of *A Swift Pure Cry*, *The Gone Book*, and *The*

*Boys of Tommen*, it is argued that silence, whether institutional, familial, or internal, is not merely an absence of speech but also a formidable force that shapes identity, agency, and the dynamics between youth and adulthood. Crucially, these texts interrogate the unjust responsibilities disproportionately placed on young individuals in the absence of parental figures. Simultaneously, by presenting themes of resistance and resilience through the concept of found families and chosen communities, these novels suggest that compassion and understanding need not arise solely from biological relationships.

While the young adult genre is inherently fluid, this is particularly concerning *The Boys of Tommen*, which is recommended for readers aged 18 and above, yet marketed as YA, a category typically targeting readers between 12 and 18 years old (Cadden 6). The works of Close, Dowd, and Walsh complicate these boundaries not by rejecting the genre altogether, but by extending its capacity to address mature and challenging themes. Their writing aligns with Close's conviction that "writers should not be afraid to challenge [young] readers" (Close, Personal Communication 2025), demonstrating how YA can accommodate increasingly complex emotional and social realities. Rather than signalling a departure from what YA has historically done, this willingness to confront uncomfortable issues reaffirms the genre's long-standing role as a platform for critical engagement, thereby providing young readers with both a sense of community and the encouragement to break through the suffocating silence.

Irish YA, then, functions not solely as a reflection of Ireland's past and present but also as a dynamic space for critique and reimagination, countering Alston's assertion that literature is "painfully slow to respond to change" (44). These narratives challenge traditional family ideals and confront intergenerational trauma, advocating for a broader, more inclusive understanding of family and adolescent identity. Centralising adolescent voices, they validate the lived experiences of young people, not as passive inheritors of trauma, but as active agents in reshaping national memory and confronting inherited silences. The concept of "babies taking care of babies," which underpins this study, encapsulates the emotional weight placed on young protagonists in the absence of adult support. Through such representations, Irish young adult literature gestures toward the potential for change, transcending the mere narrative of growing up and focusing on witnessing, dismantling silences, and envisioning new modes of existence.

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