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A Close Reading of Claire Keegan's "The Forester's Daughter"

Martin Connolly

From the very beginning of her writing career, with the publication of the short story collection *Antarctica* in 1999, Irish writer Claire Keegan (b.1967) has been praised and celebrated by many of the most important figures in Irish letters.¹⁾ Declan Kiberd, one of the most eminent Irish literary critics, has called her "a writer already touched by greatness".²⁾ And major Irish novelist Colm Tóibín dubbed her as "both an original and a canonical presence in Irish fiction."³⁾ Lending a kind of official imprimatur to all this, excerpts from Keegan's short novella *Foster* (2010) were recently chosen as part of the literature section for the Leaving Cert Test in the Republic of Ireland. Academic critical work on Keegan is quantifiably modest but qualitatively, and overwhelmingly, approbatory. Perhaps in the absence of a wide critical apparatus (often the way with contemporary work), popular opinion, or that voiced in book reviews, interviews and online blogs, can sometimes feed into scholarly observations. This can be refreshing but it also needs to be handled with care. Colm Tóibín's hyperbole, for example, might look good on a dust jacket, but suggestions that a writer has become "a canonical presence" after a mere eight years (at time of writing) and two short collections of stories misrepresents how literary canons evolve.

Another potential pitfall for a scholar approaching Keegan concerns

over-thematization. This is where a critic, drawing upon a variety of stories in Keegan's repertoire, seeks to formulate a general theme linking aspects of the stories together. Mary Fitzgerald-Hoyt, for example, chooses to highlight the assertiveness of women figures in certain narratives, and discusses how Keegan's depiction of women compares with that found in Edna O'Brien's fiction.⁴⁾ Vivian Valvano Lynch focuses on Keegan's highlighting of dysfunctionality in certain families in her stories, touching upon topics like domestic violence.⁵⁾ These are worthy explorations, but because they cover a wide area of inquiry and do so under a stated theme, it is inevitable that anything which doesn't quite fit in may be under-stated or ignored. The approach of taking one story and attempting to see how it works, by examining the elements which go into its composition, is, however, devoid of any pre-set reliance on themes, and can therefore wander more freely.

This paper is born out of my experience of teaching Keegan's stories at a post-graduate level. I would find that before we began to explore any themes within her writing, be it female assertiveness, family dysfunctionality, or domestic violence, what was needed was a practical engagement with the text at a granular level. Very simply stated, students would occasionally seek clarification on aspects which eluded comprehension, be it in regard to narrative logic, character motivation or whatever. I found that I couldn't always answer with complete confidence, and this prompted me to do my own questioning of the text, or texts, with the goal of finding some clarity. One example of how this process can be useful in unforeseen ways can be shown in regard to the novella *Foster*. In order to establish the apparent historical backdrop to the story it was necessary to sift through the text for references to historical events. Part of this had already been done, with critics having suggested that a single but detailed reference to hunger strikes in Ireland made it possible to ascertain that the story was set in 1981.

Through simple additional original research, it was possible to then pinpoint not only the year but the actual day on which one particular scene in the story is set, a point not mentioned until then. Thereafter, upon the discovery of another historical detail in the narrative, previously unmentioned, regarding the date of the general election in Ireland in 1981, it became clear that the author was not adhering strictly to the chronology of these events. Whether this was due to her literary plan or due to carelessness became a discussion point. This experience illustrated to me the need to examine the text in as much detail as possible before moving onto any discussion of wider themes.⁶⁾

Here, I focus on "The Forester's Daughter" from *Walk the Blue Fields* (2007). It is the longest story in that collection and was recently published separately as a solo work, almost like a companion piece for *Foster*. They are of similar length, which is that of a short novella, and both centre on a young girl, more or less, in the midst of a family, or family-like structure. My approach, as I state above, is to address elements in the narrative which may engender problems of simple comprehension, based upon my experience of teaching the text in the classroom. In regard to this text, I believe there are a number of areas or aspects which remain unexamined, and, as with my exploration of *Foster*, can yield much on how we read/interpret the story. Many of my observations will touch upon the idea of verisimilitude in this story, and the degree to which the author adheres to realism and how much she does not. This approach requires a little clarification at the outset.

In *A History of the Irish Short Story*, Heather Ingman sounds a note of caution in regard to attempts to interpret Irish narratives as purely realist, reacting against the "mid-twentieth century hegemony of [Frank] O'Connor's view of the short story as an epiphany in the realist mode"⁷⁾:

“A longer historical overview allows us to assess the extent the [short story] form’s alliance with realism may be limited to a certain historical moment and reminds us that while realism in the short story might seem the norm, it is not the only mode in which the Irish short story operates.” (12)

She later goes on to write of the “liminality”, citing Paul Muldoon, of the short story form in Irish writing, wherein the apparent world of the story can also be seen as a threshold into another, and that there is an ‘awareness of submerged other worlds’. Stories descend from the oral and the folk, after all, and elements of an older, non-realist mode can meld with what might appear to be even the most realist of storytelling narratives:

“A liminal form, hovering on the border between known and unknown worlds, withholding as much as it tells, the modern short story may have found in the Irish, a people accustomed to looking beneath the surface for lost worlds, its ideal readers.” (261)

This approach takes on particular force in regard to the story “The Forester’s Daughter”, because it is really a story about a story, told by a woman who derives from the travelling community. The story is steeped in folk elements, and the mode of the narrative itself is an aspect, much under-studied, which shapes the elements of that story. I will address this aspect later in my paper.

However, despite the obvious need to be sensitive to the story’s folk mode, and to the wider view that Irish stories may possess an aspect to them which can never be wholly classified as realist, the reader, and the student, should be justified in seeking clarity about what appears to be happening in the text. Verisimilitude is maybe just a mode, but it is also something

quantifiable and tangible. The temporal setting of *Foster* is something we can investigate with a degree of accuracy, and by doing so we can come to learn more about the text and what the author appears to be doing. In a similar way, "The Forester's Daughter" may draw upon oral folk traditions, but the reader should still be able to raise a hand for the sake of clarity, to ascertain aspects of the narrative for the purposes of basic comprehension. One of the areas looked at below is the author's depiction of the girl's development. Since we learn that she is twelve years old, we should be able to make some assumptions about her mental, linguistic and physical development. In such a way, we can assess Keegan's depiction of elements according to factors we are capable of knowing from general experience. So, in this paper I raise a hand for students who have found elements requiring a functional clarity with which to read the story. I do not subscribe to the idea that we may have to interpret all offences against verisimilitude with the edict that the story is in the folk mode and doesn't need to conform to realism, because narratives should still abide by at least their own internal logic. With that, I will seek to flag any elements of the text which appear to require greater attention than they have previously received, elements which are likely to confound any careful, questioning reader.

The title is a good place to start, and it is in the title where we find our first potential red flag, red signifying some conundrum or potentially baffling element. And, like many of the observations I will make, it is very simple and obvious. While the man at the centre of the story, and story title, Victor Deegan, does some forestry work now and again, his main work appears to be in raising a dairy farm. In the opening paragraph of the story, he is introduced as "Deegan, the forester", but by the end of that opening paragraph the narrator tells us what consumes Deegan's thoughts in his life on the farm in a remote spot in the Wicklow countryside: "In Aghowle there

are three teenagers, the milking and the mortgage.” By paragraph two we learn that “He bought a herd of Friesians, put electric fences round the land and installed the milking parlour”, which tends to undercut the idea that he is a forester at all. We have to wait for eight pages and the second section of the story to open to see him doing any forestry, “working beyond Coolattin pruning a line of Douglas fir” (58). We also learn, much later, that he receives a bonus check from the “Forestry Department” for catching “thieves stealing Christmas trees” (67–8), but not much else in regard to that particular activity. Maintaining a dairy farm seems to be the main source of his livelihood and that which moulds his life, as this quote from a later part of the story seems to confirm, the narrator again letting the reader in on his thoughts:

“Everything else in Aghowle stays much the same: the cows come down to the gate to be milked, the milk is put in creamery cans and collected.” (75–6)

In light of the fact that Victor is in fact not so much a forester as a dairy farmer, one might also reasonably ask, why is a dairy farmer spending any time at all in a different part of the countryside working on forestry? Dairy farming is labour intensive, requiring all the attention and dedication of the farmer to ensure that all parts of the operation go smoothly. This involves taking meticulous care of his cows, to ensure none become infected, herding them out to the fields and back into the milking parlour, maintenance of the milking parlour, doing the milking and the storing of the milk, observing all safety protocols (in a country renowned for strictness), and finally interacting and negotiating with the buyers. It is a full-time job and it would be highly unlikely he would have time to spare on forestry activity even as a

side-line. This may or may not be of any great importance to the way the general reader receives the story, as our perception of Deegan is ultimately created by his behaviour, but on a note of simple presentation, the conflation of Deegan as both dairy farmer *and* forester is potentially confusing and confounding. The story could just as easily, and perhaps more accurately, be titled "The Dairy-Farmer's Daughter".

Another confusion concerning the title has arisen due not to Claire Keegan but to critics who have written about this story. Firstly, in her 2014 paper Melania Terrazas-Gallego mistakes the main female protagonist of the story, Martha, as fulfilling the role of the "eponymous 'forester's daughter'" when Martha is clearly the forester's wife.⁸⁾ This error is repeated in Mary Fitzgerald-Hoyt's chapter on Keegan, wherein it is stated that "Martha, the 'forester's daughter', marries Deegan..."⁹⁾ In fact, it is Victoria Deegan, the child of Martha and Victor Deegan, who is clearly the "forester's daughter". It seems quite a strange error to make. There is a possible qualification which can be made about this, however: we learn that the girl is actually the progeny of Martha and the flower and plant salesman who happens to visit the farm one day when Deegan is not there and has a tryst with her. He is described as showing Martha the many plants he had in his trailer, among them "rosebushes, budding maples, Victoria plum trees, raspberry canes" (54), so there is a possibility that the "forester" of the title might refer to him rather than to Deegan. Yet, he is not referred to as "forester" even once in the text, only as a "salesman" (on six occasions, if we include the story within the story), but Deegan is, on four occasions in total. Whichever is true, we certainly cannot refer to Martha as either of the men's "daughter". Thankfully, the publisher Faber has unravelled this potential conundrum by unambiguously depicting a young girl on the front cover of the new solo version of this story, in play with her dog, against the background of a large

tree.

Connected to all this, while the girl appears in the title, as well as on the cover of the new stand-alone version, her importance in the narrative is clearly secondary to the role of the mother, Martha. Most of the narrative is concerned with the general perspective of Martha on life, with occasional detours into the consciousness of her husband and other characters, including the girl's dog. This might help to explain why two critics mistook Martha as being the "daughter" in the title, or maybe that error is simply beyond explanation. Any reader of this story might wonder why the title appears to foreground the girl when the mother is clearly more prominent. However, titles can be tricky things in literature. A hundred years later, scholars still ponder the title of the opening story in Joyce's *Dubliners*, wondering why the old ladies who enter the narrative only at the end provide the title, "The Sisters", and not the young boy who is the focus throughout.

It seems timely to explore the depiction of the daughter here in a little more detail. After the first section in which Martha is courted by Victor and they get married and settle down to life on the farm in Aghowle, the narrative slows up to picture the family, as it has now become, of the middle-aged parents and three children. We soon learn that the girl, their only daughter, preceded by two sons, has become twelve years old: "'I'm twelve,' she says. 'I can reach the top of the dresser without the stool'" (59). Seven pages later, we see the girl after she gets off the school bus which leaves her off at their farm. She is described speaking a kind of monologue which is no doubt designed to show her childish innocence, but which might be more appropriate for a child much younger than twelve:

"She climbs down from the school bus and tells them she solved a word problem in mathematics, that long ago Christina Columbus discovered

the earth was round. She says she'll let the Taoiseach marry her and then she changes her mind. She will not marry at all but become the captain of a ship. She sees herself standing on deck with a storm blowing the red lemonade out of her cup." (66)

If this seems overly childish -because it's nonsensical- for a twelve-year old secondary school-attending Irish student, the impression is compounded by the revelation six pages and at least a month or more later, that her father, having "become more than a little afraid of his wife and, to feel some kind of tenderness", often sits his daughter on his knee. "'Tuttners,' he calls her. 'My little Tuttners'" (73). It may be possible to do this, but a twelve-year-old girl is already quite grown up, and the likelihood that she would happily sit on her father's knee is debatable. It is also likely that she would, with her height and weight, constitute quite a challenge for her father to manage on one or even two knees. What Keegan seems to be doing at this stage of the narrative is to illustrate the girl's child-like innocence, but in a manner which invites questions on verisimilitude. It sets things up for the loss of that innocence which will come after she will have suffered a terrible emotional shock: the dog which her father gave her on her twelfth birthday is cruelly given away by him a few months later with no discussion. This makes her distraught, and we later learn that: "she isn't the same. There's no more talk of being the captain of a ship, or marrying the Taoiseach" (87). The narrative arc is clear enough, but whether the depiction of the child can be called convincing is debatable. A twelve-year-old child is in many ways more of a young adult than a child, with the change from primary to secondary education and even more significant change brought about by the beginning of puberty (at around 10 to 11 years). Yet Keegan's depiction of childhood here is not questioned or explored by any critics. Actually, one critic

interprets the passage quoted above, in which the girl alights from the school bus and speaks a kind of childish babble, as indicating that she is, like many daughters found in Keegan narratives, “eager, clever and imaginative with ambitions that initially cut across the gender divide.”¹⁰⁾ These qualities may be present in the girl’s speech, but the description ignores the particular context of her age and presumed educational development at that age. As with Keegan’s depiction of the dairy farmer-cum-forester, one might feel the need to ask, confronted with the image of a tallish twelve-year-old secondary schoolgirl balanced on her father’s knee being called “My little Tutners”, if the portrayal is convincing.¹¹⁾

There are aspects to the depiction of the girl’s two elder brothers which may also present difficulties to the reader. That the middle child is repeatedly referred to as a “simpleton” suggests that the narrator’s viewpoint is not entirely enlightened. It is a denigrating and reductive label, as is the portrayal of a child who is likely autistic. His role in the story is to act as an occasional commentator on events and people’s behaviour, and sometimes with an insight which belies his lowly categorization. The narrator adds to the denigration of the child by dismissing his potential for insight or complex thought, as in the scene in which Victoria is scolded by her mother for washing her dog in the kitchen sink:

“‘You’ll not bathe him in that sink again. Do you hear?’

‘He’s my birthday present. At least Daddy bought me a dog. You bought me nothing.’

‘Are you jealous?’ asks the boy.

‘What did you say?’ asks Martha.

‘Who cares?’ he says. It’s a phrase he’s heard a neighbour use which he thinks is worth repeating.

'I care,' says the girl, reaching again for the water.'" (63)

The narrator clearly undercuts the boy's contribution to the conversation by not capitalizing on his first question, which is brimming with meaning, and then by informing the reader that he is only asking the second question without actually meaning anything. If it comes across as callous, it only matches the apparent indifference of the mother (and the father throughout) to the middle son throughout the story. The boy then operates within the narrative as a kind of clown or court jester figure, whose comments are easily ignored but may have resonance in different ways. It is his second question 'Who cares?' which, after all, graces the very ending of the story.

The fate which awaits the eldest child, however, is even more eyebrow-raising: he simply disappears from the narrative. We are told that: "He has just one year left and will then become apprentice to his uncle, the plasterer who lives at Harold's Cross [in Dublin]" (64). The next we hear, a few pages later, and over a passage of time likely to be only weeks or possibly months, he is mentioned as going off to Dublin, but only "for the holidays" (68). We are told that his "mind is on the city", but his father's notion that "Aghowle will someday draw him back" then clashes with the idea that he has just gone to Dublin "for the [Christmas] holidays". Indeed, in January, Martha goes to Dublin and "comes back with her eldest boy" (82). Thereafter, he is not mentioned again. There is no mention, for example, of him returning to Dublin, and considering that we are told he only went there "for the holidays", we have no reason to think he would go back, at least until the year's training will be completed (see quote from p. 64 above). In the final section of the narrative, one paragraph, on p. 87, summarizes what all the family members have been doing and the eldest son is not mentioned. We may have to assume that he has now finished his vocational school and gone

away to be an apprentice to his uncle in Dublin as a plasterer, yet we are not actually explicitly told that. At no point is it made clear. This effectively leads to his complete erasure from the story, and from the family.

At a climactic moment of this story, when it becomes clear that Martha's fictional story is actually about her real life, the second son shouts out: "Mammy had a boyfriend!" In order to clarify that it is he who utters this, the line reads (p. 86): "Finally, he [Deegan] hears his son, the simpleton, shout, 'Mammy had a boyfriend!'" This is an awkward clarification – "his son, the simpleton" – because it's clear that among their children only he, the "simpleton" son, had been present at the storytelling, and, the very careful reader will have gathered, without having been told so in as many words, that the eldest son no longer lives there. (It is also another example of how the so-called "simpleton" son is in fact quite perceptive.) In the final scene, as the family walk away from the burning house, the eldest son is not mentioned at all, as though, even in his absence, he does not figure in the scheme of things. The eldest son, then, effectively disappears from the narrative, as though out of sight, out of mind.

An aspect of "The Forester's Daughter" which may be essential to understanding Keegan's approach, and which may help to defuse some of the criticisms above, concerns the mode of the storytelling itself. There are aspects to the narration which seem to derive from an oral mode of delivery, which is appropriate considering that the story is about a public storyteller, Martha. The narrator's delivery, for example, is direct and uncomplicated, even blunt: [to return to the lines quoted above] "He bought a herd of Friesians, put electric fences round the land and installed the milking parlour. Shortly afterwards, he drove to Courtown Harbour to find a wife." This is the kind of directness and bluntness which might entertain listeners at a live event. Another example comes after Martha takes the plunge and

marries Victor Deegan: "She sometimes found herself standing in the barn watching her fowl pecking the seed, feeling happy until she realized she wasn't." It helps to guide the reader to the particular situation, or misery, of each character, without drifting into too intimate, too complex, or too intellectual, an engagement.

Occasionally, the narrator employs phraseology that wouldn't be out of place in the mouth of an Irish storyteller, versed in cozy colloquialities: "In all the years that followed, Deegan never thought but he did love her, never thought but he showed his love." Expressions like this borrow from the speech patterns of Irish-English and would suit the delivery an orator like Martha might adopt in front of her assembled neighbours. The language is never abstruse or overly complex; it contains linguistic and semantic subtleties that an audience like Martha's might well appreciate. It also seeks to draw the reader/audience in. The opening sentence of the narrative is a case in point: "Deegan, the forester, is not the type of man to remember his children's birthdays..." Here, the narrator is inviting the reader to entertain the idea of men being easily classified into types. It is a strategy well used by oral storytellers to create a sense of shared values or outlook. One might imagine audience members turning to each other at such a point and whispering, "Oh, I know such men..." At times, rhetorical effects will be prized over grammatical propriety (here, of observing the rule of having only one subject in a sentence, not two), as when the girl is given the gift of a dog by her father: "A wily girl who is half innocence and half intuition, she stands there in a yellow dress and thanks Deegan for her birthday present" (59). The language of the narrative, then, possesses a certain charm, with an oral feel to it, and an identity which is clearly rural Irish.

The narrator also often allows the external third person viewpoint to merge with the thoughts of the person focused upon in any given scene. It is

a technique which cleverly blurs the line between disinterested narrator and a narrator somehow involved in the proceedings, or a narrator willing to give the narration over to the characters, as in the passage quoted below:

“When they [Deegan & the dog] reach Aghowle, Deegan is glad, as usual, to see his house with its chimney sending smoke up to the heavens -not that he believes in heaven. Deegan is not a religious man. He knows that beyond this world there is nothing. God is an invention created by one man to keep another at safe distance from his wife and land. But he always goes to Mass. He knows the power of a neighbour’s opinion and will not have it said that he’s ever missed a Sunday.” (58–9)

In this passage, the narrator follows Deegan’s thoughts, with a piece of linguistic sleight-of-hand. The phrase “up to the heavens” is an idiomatic, colloquial and colourful rendering of the word “upwards” and has no properly religious meaning. The re-iteration of this phrase with imported religious meaning, thanks to the simple dropping of the “s”, clearly indicates that Deegan’s thoughts have now been given access to the narration, as it is *he* who makes the connection. (And we thereafter follow his subsequent train of thought.) However, it might also be the kind of narrative trick a storyteller might employ, again, in order to entertain the audience, with Deegan’s train of thought akin to a narrative digression. The casual attack on orthodoxy in the digression would also help to spice things up for listeners brought up to believe fervently in the existence of God.

Time and again, this technique, coupled with the occasional use of Irish-English phraseology and colloquialisms, suggests that the narration is designed to at least feel rather folk-like and live, never too distant, never too educated, or too disinterested. Seen from this perspective, the tendency of

the narrator to call the second son a "simpleton" can be explained as adhering to the blunt, folksy, and not always necessarily enlightened, delivery of the storyteller. Similarly, the description of Martha's child-rearing skills might be taken with the pinch of salt any good listener can afford any good teller of tales:

"The children Martha bore, she reared casually, never threatening them with anything sharper than a wooden spoon." (55)

If we were to analyse this statement in a purely logical, and enlightened, manner, we would have to question why a mother would ever have to threaten any child she was rearing. Focus might also be brought to bear on the meaning of the adverb "casually", with those having any experience of child-raising questioning how child-rearing could ever be so described. Yet, if we accept it in the sense in which it seems to be delivered, as part of the not-always enlightened and not always entirely accurate, and yet always entertaining, mode of storytelling, then such questions begin to dissipate.

This aspect to "The Forester's Daughter" is not greatly covered by critics, who have tended to focus rather on the folk elements of the story, rather than the telling. This aspect, of course, of formal folk elements, is also of great interest -to the enjoyment of the story and in terms of seeing how the story may exist on different levels. As Fitzgerald-Hoyt puts it: "The characters inhabit modern Ireland, but folk culture lingers."¹² She delineates certain folk aspects explicitly, as here, focusing on the dog: "his ability to collect eggs and deliver turf, his rescuing of the family from a devastating fire, Judge suggests a púca or other shape-shifter of [specifically Irish] folklore..." Victoria, the girl, she suggests, may be seen by Deegan, and by any reader aware of folk legends, because of her somewhat mysterious

presence, as “a changeling of sorts”. I would aver that this idea might be bolstered by the fact that her name is conspicuously inappropriate: only that part of her connects to Victor Deegan. Two other critics also emphasize the mythic and folkloric aspects of the story, Claudia Luppino stating that it “powerfully testifies to Keegan’s interest in myths and folklore”¹³⁾ and Terrazas-Gallego suggesting that “the mythical element plays a crucial role too. Keegan utilizes the world of fantasy, dreams and the surreal to enable her characters to escape from real life into a world of wonder and happiness.”¹⁴⁾

Elke D’hoker, writing of Keegan’s narratives in general states: “Keegan often infuses her stories with powerful symbols which at times escape the dominant, realist mode”, further suggesting that “The Forester’s Daughter” even crosses over “into the surreal”.¹⁵⁾ The views of commentators like D’hoker, Fitzgerald-Hoyt, Luppino and Terrazas-Gallego help to provide a way of looking at Keegan’s narratives as framed beyond the realist mode. Furthermore, seeing the narration of “The Forester’s Daughter” as in large part leaning toward the oral rather than the written mode, it is tempting to forgive the author just about everything which might step on the toes of verisimilitude or realism proper. Listeners to a story are only likely to object if an element is uninteresting, not if it’s implausible. And yet, the introduction of the dog’s consciousness into the narrative of “The Forester’s Daughter” is liable to raise eyebrows.

Tolstoy, if only briefly, gives some space to the thoughts of the sled-pulling dogs in *War & Peace*, and where would Jack London’s *Call of the Wild* be without the consciousness of the dog at the centre of that story? Yet, in Keegan’s hands, the dog’s thoughts are layered with a kind of particularly human wisdom and complexity likely to surprise, or even dismay, the most flexible of readers:

"Judge is glad he cannot speak. He has never understood the human compulsion for conversation: people, when they speak, say useless things that seldom if ever improve their lives. Their words make them sad. Why can't they stop talking and embrace each other?" (65)

Readers may be divided by this narrative feature, with some seeing it as a fanciful exploration of a cast-member likely to be ignored by most writers, and others regarding it as an unsubtle piece of anthropomorphism. If the latter, the dog only masquerades as a dog, being clearly more of a human commentator in disguise. Passing over the idea that a dog might be able to analyse human emotional and linguistic interaction, and with such depth and perspicacity, a reader might reasonably inquire: how can a four-legged animal urge two-legged ones to "embrace"? Interestingly, on the subject of humans' compulsion for "saying useless things", the author has expressed similar ideas in interviews.¹⁶⁾ Indeed, it goes to the heart of much of Keegan's depiction of human interaction throughout her stories. If so, then Judge might be seen as her ventriloquist's dummy.

The anthropomorphism doesn't stop there. Not only is Judge pictured contemplating the failures of human inter-communication, he also seems to be aware of the concept of buying and selling:

"Judge lies in his new bed, rolls onto his back and stares at the drawers under the table. This is a different sort of house but Deegan will sell him just as soon as he finds the opportunity." (61)

Whether it is an offence against verisimilitude or an over-stretching of the fantastical aspect of giving the reader access to a dog's thoughts, any reader may well ask: "How can a dog know anything about selling, or about

money, or even about the future?” These are indelibly human concepts, after all. D’hoker’s suggestion about the narrative crossing over “into the surreal” might seem entirely appropriate here. It may, however, also be a case of a critic using a well-established artistic label to plaster over the cracks in the narrative. It may make the narrative at this point look more acceptable to be termed surrealist in nature, but whether it is or not, this passage will still be read by some as an example of unsubtle anthropomorphism, ultimately forcing the reader to go along with the idea that a dog is well-versed in the complex aspects of human society, from inter-person communication to economics, and a whole lot in between.

Later, when the chickens coming out of their coop are described as “suspicious as always” (65), it seems the author is allowing the reader access to their thoughts, too. Indeed, a few pages later, after a fox attacks their coop, the author does go one step further:

“[The fox] has killed two hens and taken another. Their young look demented. In the chaos they keep searching but every wing they find is not their mother’s.” (69)

Whether the author can interpret the feelings of the surviving chickens or not, the reader will ask how a chicken can “look demented”. Chickens’ faces do not possess the range of muscular features that human faces do, and to suggest that they can is asking quite a lot: a “demented” chicken’s face would look exactly the same as a “contented” chicken’s face. Again, we have the option to take all this with a grain of salt, ceding the storyteller as much rope as is needed to spin the yarn, or, to borrow from folksy idiom, as much rope as will hang him or her. Furthermore, the interpretation of the actions of the chickens, following the fox attack, necessarily a lot of

squawking and running about, is again described in baldly anthropomorphized fashion.

Critic Claudia Luppino is rather more accepting of Keegan's writing here. She suggests that the chickens may be read as symbolic of women, both of whom are exploited for what their bodies can produce in order to contribute to a patriarchal greed-based uncaring society, as connoted by her husband Deegan and his conception of family.¹⁷⁾ This is why Martha, his very enlightened wife, buries the dead chickens and ignores her husband's request to have them brought to the kitchen instead. It is an interesting take, but also one which appears to gloss over the licence Keegan takes with fundamental reality: the physiognomy and psychology of chickens. It is clear that Keegan is trying to push boundaries, but how successful such a strategy is will be entirely up to how much each reader is ready to accept the lengths to which Keegan, or the storytelling narrator, is willing to go. To some, inevitably, giving voice to dogs and chickens may be a step too far into territory best left unexplored.

My copy of *Walk the Blue Fields*, and those of *Antarctica* and *Foster*, is covered in notes, and is sprouting numerous multi-coloured sticky-notes, too. Any book of literature which I would teach would be covered in notes. The notes on my Keegan volumes are plentiful because on almost every page, and sometimes many times on one page, there are elements which cause me to ask questions. The practical purpose of these questions and notes relates to how I might be able to teach the stories, how to explain or to open discussion on the narratives, at whatever point. Simple comprehension is a wonderful thing to aim for, after all, as is attention to detail. It is an intensive process, part and parcel of the experience of literature, but, in regard to Keegan's narratives, it is a process which uncovers so much that is not aired in other critical studies. And that is often surprising: many of these

elements are not small, but very conspicuous, like the conundrum of the very title, and the occupation of the man in that title. A simple approach to Keegan's texts which focuses on the bits and pieces of the storytelling, small and large, therefore seems an entirely useful exercise. By means of close reading and asking basic questions about basic things, like the presentation of the behaviour of the characters, or the nature of the narrative itself, we slowly begin to open up the text for further study. This is preferable to allowing all the praise and the thematization of her work to lull us into submission and acceptance that Claire Keegan is the best thing since sliced bread. It is good to ask questions, wherever they may lead. Here, the questions sometimes lead to the possible conclusion that Keegan isn't always as careful a writer as she might be, who, for example, allows one of the characters to float away from the narrative without sufficient explanation or meaning, and is not averse to using debatably crude tactics, like anthropomorphism, to progress her narrative. But similar basic inquiries to aspects of the text can lead to revelations about the style, which, when sufficiently understood in the context of this story about storytelling, disclose the possible playfulness of the narrative/narrator and an archness in the humour of the telling, in turn leading to the notion -to be debated- that too serious, or too picky, a listener/reader might be the one who fails to see the beauty, and the fun, of the whole.

Text of "The Forester's Daughter" used here in *Walk the Blue Fields*, (2007), Black Cat.

Also, some use of the recent electronic (Kindle) version of the stand-alone version of the story by Faber, Faber Stories Kindle Edition, 2019.

Notes

- 1) In a review of her debut collection, *Antarctica*, *The Times Literary Supplement* invokes comparison with Joyce's *Dubliners*. Hilary Mantel talks of 'Immaculate structure...' and Anne Enright calls them 'Perfect short stories...' The English and Creative Writing Dept. of the University of Aberdeen describes Claire Keegan as 'one of the finest prose writers in the world, and arguably Ireland's best living writer of short stories.' Acclaimed author David Mitchell states that Claire Keegan is 'as good as Chekhov'. A good place to find many of these references is on Claire Keegan's official site, at: <https://ckfictionclinic.com/reviews-3/> Accessed May 27, 2020.
- 2) See Liam Harte's mention of this in his review of *Walk the Blue Fields* in *The Irish Times*: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/critical-acclaim-that-was-not-misplaced-1.1205665> Accessed June 16, 2020.
- 3) See <https://groveatlantic.com/book/walk-the-blue-fields/> Accessed May 27, 2020.
- 4) Fitzgerald-Hoyt, Mary (2015), "Claire Keegan's New Rural Ireland: Torching the Thatched Cottage," in *Reimagining Ireland: The Irish Short Story*, Vol. 63, eds. Elke D'hoker & Stephanie Eggermont, pp. 278–296.
- 5) Valvano Lynch, Vivian, (2015), "'Families can be awful places': The Toxic Parents of Claire Keegan's Fiction", in *New Hibernia Review*, 19:1, Spring, pp. 131–146.
- 6) This became a paper: Connolly, Martin (2020), "Finding Flaws in Claire Keegan's *Foster* -a close textual reading", *The Bulletin of Tsurumi University, Studies in Foreign Languages and Literature*, No 57, pp. 39–63.
- 7) Ingman, Heather (2009), *A History of the Irish Short Story*, Cambridge.
- 8) Terrazas-Gallego, Melania (2014), "Claire Keegan's Use of Satire", *Estudios Irlandeses*, Number 9, pp. 80–95; here, see p. 85.
- 9) Fitzgerald-Hoyt (2015), p. 284.
- 10) D'hoker, Elke (2016), *Irish Women Writers and the Modern Short Story* [electronic resource], Springer International Publishing, Palgrave Macmillan, p. 163.
- 11) Similarly, in my paper on *Foster* (2020), I discuss the depiction of the girl protagonist and suggest, via illustrations from the text, that her behaviour doesn't always appear age-appropriate, in the subsection "The age of the girl", pp. 54–59.

- 12) Fitzgerald-Hoyt (2015), p. 285.
- 13) Luppino, Claudia, (2014), p. 10, “The Old and the New in Claire Keegan’s Short Fiction”, *Journal of the Short Story in English* [online], 63, Autumn, pp. 1–14. Accessed May 20, 2020.
- 14) Terrazas-Gallego (2014), p. 86. While Victoria does seem to exhibit some mysterious aspects to her character, her affinity with animals and, in Deegan’s mind, her “witch-like resemblance to her mother” (in opening of story) among them, Terrazasa-Gallego’s insistence that “Victoria is a genuine tinker girl” might be slightly overstating the case, I feel, as Martha only heard from her own mother “that her father’s people had tinker’s blood”. (79)
- 15) D’hoker (2016), p. 163.
- 16) See “Claire Keegan and the art of subtraction” on YouTube, taken from the 2010 edition of HoCoPoLitSo’s *The Writing Life*, with poet and musician Terence Winch. Accessed May 27, 2020.
- 17) Luppino (2014), p. 11.