

## Trabajo Fin de Grado

Unmasking the Witch:  
Feminist Empowerment in Emma Donoghue's *Kissing  
the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins*

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Emma Donoghue was born in Dublin, Ireland, in October 1969. She is the youngest of eight children of Francis and the Irish academic and literary critic Denis Donoghue. She attended Catholic convent schools in Dublin, but spent a year studying in New York at the age of ten. In 1990 she earned a first-class honors BA in English and French from University College Dublin. Later, she moved to England where she would receive a PhD from the University of Cambridge in 1997. After years of commuting between England, Ireland, and Canada, she finally settled in London, Ontario (Canada) in 1998, becoming a Canadian citizen in 2004. She works with very different genres, such as drama or literary history, but she is best-known for her fiction writings. I have chosen *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins*, her third book of fiction and first story collection, as the focus for this essay. The book, later adapted into a play, was published in 1997, and it is a series of thirteen re-imagined fairytales, inspired by traditional European sources, which are linked to each other through the figure of "the witch". The witch or the alleged evil figure of one fairytale is the protagonist of the next tale, what provides a different point of view and helps us to understand the reasons behind the "witch": her own story that has made her what she is. As Elizabeth Wanning states, Donoghue's reworking of the tales is a play for voices: each tale is told by a different voice, always autodiegetic narratives which are linked to the others, but yet they are different in style and perspective from the others (134). This essay will focus on two retellings from *Kissing the Witch*: "The Tale of the Rose" and "The Tale of the Voice", which are new versions of the traditional tales *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Little Mermaid*, and the original tale "The Tale of the Kiss". The aim of this essay is to analyze the strategies Emma Donoghue uses in order to subvert the conventions of traditional fairytales, especially concerning the representation of female characters, with

a focus on the figure of the witch, who will be no longer demonized but shown in a different light so that her real character may be understood. According to Wanning, Donoghue is especially interested in "rehabilitating the witch": showing a witch who is both human and vulnerable, "contesting the ways the witch has been represented in generations of tale-telling" (130). In a similar vein, the Beast in "The Tale of the Rose" will be connected to the figure of the witch as she embodies similar connotations and confronts the same problems as the witch in "The Tale of the Voice" and in "The Tale of the Kiss". The three tales offer a very intimate and different representation of the witch that will help the reader feel closer to the character, but it is the "Tale of the Kiss" the one that offers a deeper understanding of the figure of the witch as human.

## **2. FEMINIST REWRITINGS OF FAIRY TALES**

Rewriting became a very popular feminist strategy to subvert the female stereotypes and ideology on which texts from the past were grounded. The patriarchal model of texts from the past usually polarized women in a dichotomy of idealization or demonization (misogyny), which according to Walker was the result of fairy tales being filtered through centuries through patriarchal culture, what prompted the creation of texts which showed little respect for women, except for young and beautiful "princesses", being "decorative" the customary female function in these old stories. Therefore, women were represented either as angels or as monsters and more often than not, were described superficially, as merely archetypes. In order to put an end to these stereotypes in which women have been depicted by men in literature, Adrienne Rich explained that "re-vision –the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering and old text from a new critical direction– is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves" (90). She saw rewriting the literary canon as a

necessary rupture from the past, a creative and political act that helped to subvert the traditional perception of women by giving voice to women and/or portraying women in a different light from the one found in the text the rewriting is based on. Zipes develops this idea concluding that feminist fairy tales give a different view of the world, speaking in a voice that has been consistently silenced; and explains that retellings can be used to elaborate social choices and alternatives for both genders, giving opportunity for a new socialization (qtd. in Crowley 299).

Emma Donoghue uses the structure of fairy tales in order to criticize their depiction of women, especially that of the witches, who have been traditionally understood as negative characters, as they are free women who live outside a patriarchal society that rejects female autonomy (Domínguez, 3). These independent characters posed a threat to the patriarchal status quo and therefore were presented as dangerous and monstrous, as something to avoid. According to Beatriz Domínguez, witches are the only valid female prototype in contemporary society, as they are the only ones who show the female protagonist that intelligence and independence are women's most valuable qualities, instead of beauty (4). Emma Donoghue's retellings will perfectly frame this situation, and the main role of witches will be to awaken the female protagonists into a world of female empowerment. However, her retellings must be understood as not belonging to the second wave of feminism but as third wave, as they do not focus on the concerns of white middle-class women but on a broader conception of gender, of all women as human beings, especially embracing non-heterosexual women. In Donoghue's tales, the witches' isolation from society and their rejection is grounded in their deviation from patriarchal society: they do not follow the role of passive and obliging woman destined to be a wife and mother, and therefore the sexual

orientation of the witches is a further threat to the patriarchal values and aggravates their marginal situation.

In order to subvert the traditional representation of women in literature, Donoghue gives voice to women by introducing a first person autodiegetic narrator who is the female protagonist, and also by exploring the thoughts and concerns of the female characters further than traditional tales did. Besides, Donoghue also uses the traditional formal features of the tale, retaining the "apparently timeless settings and simple language that we associate with tales" (Wanning, 130) in order to challenge the received ideas and raise questions on them; according to Marina Warner, "protest and fairy tale have long been associated" (411). Donoghue uses some conventions of the fairy tales so as to keep certain resemblance with the source tales for her retellings, but she introduces the female autodiegetic narrator and other innovations in order to give the tales a renewed perspective<sup>1</sup>. As Karlyn Crowley and John Pennington state, Donoghue revises tales both thematically and structurally, challenging "the original tale's faulty gender assumptions and providing new, liberatory gender possibilities" (307).

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<sup>1</sup> The way in which Donoghue uses the convention of fairy tales can be also understood as parody in the sense of "repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity" (Hutcheon, 6). What Donoghue does is to use parody to denounce the ideology of fairy tales by using the conventions of the genre.

### **3. ANALYSIS**

#### **3.1. Traditional vs. Donoghue's Fairy Tales: A Comparison**

"The Tale of the Rose", written by Emma Donoghue, is based on Madame le Prince de Beaumont's version of *Beauty and the Beast*. This fairytale was published in 1756 under the French name *La Belle et la Bête*. For its part, the "Tale of the Voice" is based on Hans Andersen's *Little Mermaid*, published in 1837 under the Danish name "*Den lille havfrue*". Both fairy tales date centuries back, and multiple versions and variants of these tales have been written and taken into scene in plays and films over time. Although each version adds its own point of view and omits or adds things to the traditional tale, all tales preserve some characteristics that make the source tale identifiable. The main innovations that Emma Donoghue introduces in her version of the tales are the focus on the point of view of the female protagonist, the omission of most magical elements in order to make the tales more realistic and relatable to real life situations and persons, and a renewed representation of the female characters, especially in the case of the witch.

Comparing the retellings with the traditional fairy tales on which they are based, we find several important differences, starting from the issue of perspective. While the "Tale of the Rose" focuses on the point of view of the female protagonist, who is an autodiegetic narrator, Madame le Prince de Beaumont's *Beauty and the Beast* is written from the external point of view of an omniscient narrator, explaining what happens when the father is abroad and how he ends up making a deal with the Beast. This change of narrator and focalizer is one of the bases of feminist writing, which advocates for giving voice to women, and the best way to do it is with a female autodiegetic narrator. Besides, there are also differences in the characters: the original tale includes three brothers who are left aside in the retelling, keeping only the three sisters.

Nevertheless, in the source tale the role of these three brothers is completely superfluous: they are mainly used to establish a dichotomy of worried and compassionate brothers as opposed to the envious and wicked sisters, strengthening the idea of gender differences on what refers to personality. Essentially, the two sisters are presented as envious, cruel, insensitive and frivolous, and these attitudes are frequently emphasized, many times opposed to the affected and caring brothers. Like many traditional tales, Madame le Prince de Beaumont's *Beauty and the Beast* emphasizes the idea of a natural rivalry between women, while men are praised as naturally good or neutral, but rarely characterized with features such as envy or meanness, as these are traditionally thought to be inherent characteristics of the female gender.

Another difference between these two versions of *Beauty and the Beast* is that Emma Donoghue's version excludes the magical elements<sup>2</sup> and makes the tale much more human and realistic, creating rounder characters, instead of the traditional stereotypical flat characters of the fairy tales. Another important difference is the reasons why the protagonist rejects the Beast: in the traditional tale, she rejects him because of his external appearance, while in the retelling it is not because of the physical appearance, because she never gets to see Beast's face. The reason why the protagonist initially rejects the Beast in Emma Donoghue's "The Tale of the Rose" is the preconceived ideas that she has about the Beast, all those ideas that she has learned from fairy tales and from the gossips of the people from the village. Finally, the most significant difference between the two versions might be the reasons why the protagonist decides to go to the Beast's Castle and why she decides to stay. In the traditional tale, she goes to the castle because her father asks her to, even though she

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<sup>2</sup> The magical elements that are excluded in the retellings are the monstrous traces of both the Beast and the witch, who have no monstrous or animal features as happens in the source tales, and the human condition of the protagonist in "The Tale of the Voice", who in the source tale –*The Little Mermaid*– is a mermaid. Also, spells and curses are denied, and the witch in the tales of the Voice and the Kiss insists on the idea that she has no magical powers at all.



does not want to go; later she stays because the Beast transforms into a handsome prince who offers her richness and happiness and they marry. In the retelling she decides to go, she feels like facing an adventure, she is not forced to go; she later stays because in the castle she is given independence, freedom and access to knowledge. She is offered by the "Beast", who turns out to be a woman, an alternative to the traditional role of women in society. Instead of the traditional heterosexual conception of fulfilment through marriage, she is offered freedom to decide for herself and choose what makes her happy, to be herself without being afraid of the judgment or reprisals of society. A last detail to take into account is that in the traditional fairy tale, the sisters are punished for their envy and their actions, while the father and the brothers who freely gave the protagonist to a monster are not punished anyway. This ending emphasizes the rivalry between women, which is ultimately punished, in opposition to the ending of the retelling, which includes no revenge on the sisters.

The distinctions between "The Tale of the Voice" and Hans Andersen's *Little Mermaid* are less prominent than in the previous tales, but are still present. The first difference is that all the fantastic and luxurious elements described in Hans Andersen's fairy tale are omitted in Emma Donoghue's retelling, offering an earthlier version of the story, with a mundane protagonist who is the daughter of a fisherman and not a mermaid. This makes the reader's identification with the protagonist easier, suggesting that what happens to the protagonist could happen to any woman. What the protagonists in the two versions have in common is their desire to find happiness with a man and their willingness to sacrifice everything in order to fulfill this romantic desire. However, the hidden motivation behind that desire is different: in the retelling, she wants to find a man because it is what is expected from her as a woman entering certain age; in the traditional tale she thinks that finding love –the culmination of heterosexual love

through marriage— will give her a soul (which the sirens lack, according to the tale) and lead her to heaven. In neither of the two versions the prince is the key for their happiness. In the retelling the protagonist finds happiness by learning to value herself and her voice, while in the traditional tale she finds happiness by sacrificing herself for the prince's happiness. This ending of the traditional tale shows a selfless woman who, after the prince has rejected her, still wants his happiness above everything and, because of that selflessness, she becomes a daughter of the air and finds peace. Therefore, the focus is on the man, and the protagonist's happiness is still subject to that of the male character. The ending of the retelling shows that happiness depends on oneself, on learning how to value and love ourselves; it is a much more gender-equitable ending.

However, the most important difference that I have found –given the topic of discussion in this essay– is the depiction of the witch. The witch in "The Tale of the Voice" is very human, with the physical characteristics of any woman of an advanced age, but with no monstrous features or magical attributes. Contrary to this, the witch in Hans Andersen's tale is described as disgusting, living in a dangerous place surrounded by weird animals and corpses. Also, in this version it is the witch who asks the protagonist for something in exchange and seems to enjoy her suffering. In the retelling, the witch tries to convince her not to sacrifice her voice in order to make a man fall in love with her and it is the protagonist who is determined to give anything in order to achieve this love. In Emma Donoghue's version, the witch does not make any kind of magic; it is the protagonist who thinks that she has been bewitched, following the beliefs that she has acquired from tales or folks.

### 3.2 Reversal of stereotypes from fairy tales

Emma Donoghue's retellings make use of the structure and conventions of the fairy tale in order to criticize the ideologies and prejudices that fairy tales themselves have endorsed throughout the centuries. I will now focus on both "The Tale of the Rose" and "The Tale of The Voice" in order to analyze the use of the female protagonists' point of view so as to expose the influence of prejudices promoted by fairy tales, and "The Tale of the Kiss" in order to explore the use of the figure of the witch as criticism upon the traditional interpretation of female characters as either passive, beautiful and good or loquacious, ugly and perverse. This coincides with Warner's ideas in *From the Beast to the Blonde*, which explain the tendency of fairy tales to make heroines silent and witches loquacious: "The Grimms gradually made their heroines more polite, well-spoken, or even silent, [...] while their wicked female characters become more and more vituperative and articulate" (281). Moreover, Warner exposes that the studies on traditional fairy tales –such as Ruth Bottigheimer's study of the Grimms' fairy tales– have led to the detection of a tendency in which "virtue spoke up less and less, while villainy became more loquacious, with the witches and wicked stepmothers far surpassing other women in articulacy." (394). This equation of silence with virtue is shown to be one of the main stereotypes in which the protagonist of "The Tale of the Voice" believes, as she decides to lose her voice in order to make the "prince" love her; she seems to believe that beauty is enough, that silence is a virtue.

Thus, the protagonists in "The Tale of the Rose" and in "The Tale of the Voice" are examples of women whose ideals stem from the preconceived ideas that fairy tales and folk tales have transmitted to them. However, as the tales develop, both protagonists realise that those conceptions do not represent reality by any means, and they evolve and become wiser by leaving aside those fantasies.

In “The Tale of the Rose” the aspect that is affected by the ideals transmitted by fairy tales is the conception that the protagonist has of “the Beast”. She believes what the people tell her about it and what she has read from books or heard from tales. The first description that we get of the Beast is the opinion that the villagers have about it: “The Young queen had been exiled, imprisoned, devoured (here the stories diverged) by a hooded beast who could be seen at sunset walking on the battlements. No one had ever seen the monster’s face and lived to describe it.” (KW, 32). Later in the tale, it is noticeable that this opinion has influenced her own judgment, which she bases on her preconceived ideas instead of on how the Beast acts: “The beast was always courteous; I wondered what scorn his courtesy veiled. The beast was always gentle; I wondered what violence hid behind this gentleness” (KW, 34, 35). The protagonist continues describing how she imagines the Beast, whom she has never seen: “[...] I thought the beast must be everything I was not: dark to my light, rough to my smooth, hoarse to my sweet” (KW, 35). She imagines the Beast in terms of dichotomies, a usual feature in traditional fairy tales. This follows the traditional opposition of princess and witch, in which the princess represents light, purity, softness and sweetness while the witch is darkness, roughness, evil.

The protagonist judges the Beast according to the ideas that society has transmitted to her through popular beliefs, fairy tales, rumours, etc. When the Beast asks the protagonist “You have never seen my face. Do you still picture me as a monster?” (KW, 35), she still thinks of the Beast as so; she is unable to see beyond her prejudices and judge the Beast by its acts, as the Beast only tries to make her happy by giving the protagonist access to knowledge, independence and freedom to ask for whatever she desires. Besides, when the Beast tells her that she is not a man, she does not consider the option that she is a woman; she instantly thinks about trolls, ogres and other

creatures that fairy tales have taught her about. In that respect, we could consider that Emma Donoghue's retellings criticise traditional tales and the way they implant unreal ideals in the people's minds, creating prejudices that condition our perception of reality and people around us. Another affirmation that the protagonist makes, can be considered as following the traditional dichotomy of princess and witch: "When I walked on the battlements under the waning moon, the beast was the grotesque shadow I threw behind me" (KW, 35): the protagonist represents the princess as light, and the Beast represents the witch as darkness. Warner explains this polarized version stating that "fairy tales often engage with issues of light and darkness [...] to distinguish enemies from friends, the normal from the monstrous.[...] The tales often demonize others in order to proclaim the side of the teller good, right, powerful – and beautiful" (410). However, there is another possible interpretation that infers just the opposite idea: the Beast is similar to the protagonist as a shadow is similar to what casts it, it is the light from which we see it that makes them seem different. This means that both of them are very similar, almost equal in essence, but they seem different because of the perception that society has of them. This can be interpreted as a criticism of the society's conception of independent women who do not follow the traditional ideal of women (fertile, sweet, submissive) as something to avoid. Under the confusing light of the moon, the shadow of the protagonist looks like the beast, and under the partial look of the society, an independent woman is seen as a monster. This tale ends by exposing the distorted vision that society gives us about reality and the partiality of people's opinion: "And the years flowed by, some villagers told travellers of a beast and a beauty who live in the castle and could be seen walking on the battlements, and others told of two beauties, and others, of two beasts" (KW, 40). This tale reverses the idea that women are enemies, as Madame le Prince de Beaumont's *Beauty and the Beast*

suggests, and implies that they are indeed similar and should appreciate each other, not believing what society tells them, but getting to know each other for real, leaving prejudices aside.

The influence of prejudices and conceptions transmitted by traditional fairy tales is also a very important theme in "The Tale of the Voice". In this tale, the influence of these ideals is connected with the conception of the figure of the witch, but especially with the expectations that traditional fairytales created on women. These expectations are that every woman has to find her "prince" and marry to have a happy life and avoid being single and ultimately becoming a social outcast like witches. "The Tale of the Voice" begins with the protagonist expressing the social pressure she feels to find a man, as she is starting to grow some white hairs and some have already offered to marry her, and if she does not decide soon she will never have a family and fulfil "her role" in society. These prejudices about the role of women in society and the features that make a woman an outcast are better explained in the last tale, "The Tale of the Kiss". But, focusing on "The Tale of the Voice", the protagonist expresses this concern for finding a man to marry: "If I didn't choose him, who was ten times better than any I'd ever set eyes on, I'd never choose" (KW, 187). Moreover, on the same page we find another relevant clue to see that it is social pressure what persuades her to find a husband: "The morning after I saw this man in the marketplace I woke up sick to my stomach and decided I was in love". From the beginning, the tale is letting us know that she is not really in love with that man, she rationalizes love instead of feeling it; she "decides" to be in love, because society urges her to marry as soon as possible in order to fulfil her role as a woman. As Alice Neikirk argues, fairy tales like *The Little Mermaid* have created the cultural expectation that settling down and marrying is of utmost importance for girls (39). The protagonist emphasizes the idea that she *has* to have him, because

otherwise she will have no husband: "This man was everything I wasn't, hadn't, couldn't. [...] If I couldn't have him, I'd have nothing" (KW, 187). She idealises him and undermines herself, even though she has not even talked to him and he ends up being an awful person, but she convinces herself that he is perfect because she is afraid of staying single forever. Yet, the tale suggests that it would have been better for her to stay alone rather than being in bad company. Besides, the tale also exposes and dismantles the myth of love at first sight. When the protagonist tells the witch that she has not even talked to the man she is determined to change for, the witch reacts with scepticism and irony: "This must be love indeed, she said, if you know nothing about him" (KW, 192).

Other prejudices created by fairy tales are exposed in the meeting between the protagonist and the witch, and the way in which the protagonist imagines and treats the witch. When the protagonist is heading to the place where the witch lives, she remembers all the stories she has heard about witches, and the things the villagers say about her, like she enjoys bewitching people just for fun or that she has a monstrous appearance with animal features. However, the protagonist seems to believe them only partially: "They said so many things about her, they couldn't all be true" (KW, 189). Even though the protagonist follows many of the principles instilled by fairy tales, she even realises that some things they say must be farfetched. Indeed, the description of the witch has nothing of monstrous or terrifying: "She was everything I half expected: a stoop, a stick, a wart on her nose, a whisker on her chin. [...] And yet she surprised me" (KW, 189). She complies the classic depiction of a witch, but as the protagonist says, there is something that surprises her; she had probably expected something more frightening, as her appearance is that of any old lady. Maybe if she had seen an old woman like her in the village baking cakes, she would have thought of her as an adorable grandmother. It is the preconceived ideas caused by fairy tales and patriarchal

society that makes the protagonist connect this woman with the idea of a witch. Even though the witch does not show any magical features and insists on the fact that she is not going to bewitch the protagonist, she is convinced that the only solution for her problems is to receive some magic aid from the witch. She is so deeply influenced, that she even believes that when the witch touches her throat, she has taken her voice away. When she is heading to the city, she feels that the spell has worked, as men turn their heads to look at her; yet, it is no spell but the self-confidence that she has gained that makes her attractive. In contrast with the ending of "The Tale of the Rose", the protagonist in this tale is unable to understand the witch and see her as she really is. She ends up hating the witch, even though she has been trying to help her throughout the entire story, but the prejudices that are so deeply rooted in the protagonist's mind prevent her from opening her mind and understanding the acts of the witch instead of misjudging her. The witch's point of view and her reaction to this reiterative treatment throughout her life is exposed in the last tale of the collection: "The Tale of the Kiss".

"The Tale of the Kiss" is the only original tale of the collection –it is not based on any pre-existing tale– and it is also the one that focuses directly on the figure of the witch who narrates her "transition" into becoming a witch, the causes behind this "transformation" and her reflections and feelings. The tale starts with the protagonist-narrator saying that she knows what people say and think about her, but "contrary to what you might half believe, I am no monster under my skirts" (KW, 207). From the beginning, we are given one of the most important and symbolic statements of the book. The protagonist does not only dismantle the beliefs drilled into people by fairy tales and myths, but her assertion also serves as a criticism to the demonization of women. "I am no monster under my skirts" can refer to the literal deformation that the witch in the original tale *The Little Mermaid* has, or to the fact that the key for the prejudices that



she suffers resides in what there is under her skirt: her sexuality, being a woman. As the tale develops, we discover that the protagonist is considered to be a witch not for anything she does, but just for being a single woman, different from the rest. She narrates how her life starts to clutter when she discovers that she no longer has her period, that she is infertile: "As far as my people were concerned, women like me had no future" (KW, 208). Exposed in a tone of resignation, but expressing that she does not share this point of view, she brings forth the traditional conception of women as mothers and wives, and serves as a criticism to the idea that women serve no other purpose: "I knew what they thought of women past bearing [...] they were old rags tossed in the corner [...] A barren woman was hated even more; the way they saw it, she had never earned a bite of bread" (KW, 208). This exposes that women who do not follow the established norms of society are not only left aside, but something worse. This coincides with the ideas exposed in Adrienne Rich's poem "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" by Adrienne Rich, which narrates some women's fear to find their own voices, as women who rebelled received negative reactions, especially from men but also from other women. The poem also exposes, therefore, the idea of confrontation between women, which is very important in traditional fairy tales and demolished by Emma Donoghue in her retellings.

The protagonist of "The Tale of the Kiss" reinforces her independence and opposition to traditional gender roles by refusing to lie and pretend to be someone who she is not, or by blaming other women for her infertility: "I could of course have lied and smiled, got myself a sturdy husband. [...] I could have sunk my nails into one (a man) [...] even pointed the finger at some other woman for looking crossways at me and hexing my belly" (KW, 208). In Emma Donoghue's retellings, the witches are the ultimate representation of strong women who don't want to follow the precepts of

society and who want to be more than a quiet and pleasant wife. The witches' best strength in Donoghue's tales is knowledge and learning how to live and take advantage of social rejection. The protagonist of "The Tale of the Kiss" emphasizes this idea in the following excerpts: "So it was a witch they were wanting [...] soon enough I learned how to be what they needed" and "It was the first time I felt the reach of my power. Power that came not from my own thin body or my own taut mind, but was invested in me by a village" (KW, 211, 213). The villagers have their own prejudices and fixed ideas, and they will not see or try to understand anything else, so the witch makes the most of this situation, half resigned and half happy because it gives her independence and empowers her. The power of women and their autonomy is another key theme in Emma Donoghue's retellings.

### **3.3 Women's empowerment**

In *Kissing the Witch*, the witches are the ultimate representation of strong women, independent and intelligent, who do not stick to the established norms and value their freedom over anything else. Neikirk states that fairy tales have traditionally created a correlation between empowered females and evil (39), being the previously listed features what make them "witches" to the eyes of society and make the protagonists misjudge them –at least until they get to know and understand them. Unlike traditional fairy tales, the witches are presented in a very positive light, with positive personality traits and values. Indeed, the witches are the characters that guide the protagonists towards an evolution, always trying to help them and prompting them to value themselves and search for their happiness, for the power they own inside themselves. In "The Tale of the Rose" the protagonist will understand the "witch" (the Beast) and decide the kind of life she wants to live, being free, outside social norms and with access to endless knowledge. In the "Tale of the Voice" the protagonist will not

accept the witch, even though she only tries to help her; nevertheless, she will learn to value herself and achieve a better and happier life with a fisherman who likes to hear her talk, partly thanks to the witch's lesson. Finally, in "The Tale of the Kiss" we will see in depth the thoughts and motivation of the witch, her own transformation and search for her real self.

From the very first meeting of the Beast with the protagonist in "The Tale of the Rose", the Beast gives importance to the protagonist's free will, and the first thing that it asks to her is: "Do you come consenting?" (KW, 33). The Beast does not intend to hold her prisoner or even against her will, and instead of that, it offers her a new world in which her desires matter the most, and with endless access to knowledge –represented by a vast library. The tale emphasizes the importance of knowledge and education, which has been historically denied to women: "The sound of the pages turning was the sound of magic" (KW, 36). The protagonist defines it as "magic" because it is something new for her, and she values it greatly, as it is knowledge that makes us free, what gives women the key for being independent and not just a beautiful ornamental wife.

Besides, the Beast gives the protagonist the status of "mistress" and not that of lady: "You are the mistress: ask for whatever you wish" (KW, 34). The word mistress is important as it is the female form of master, and it denotes power, something that was rarely or never ascribed to female protagonists in traditional tales, whose tendency was to be quiet, innocent and passive. However, the protagonist, when given this power, does not know what to ask for, as she has all the material things she could need, and what she really seeks is knowledge: "I didn't know what to ask for. I had a room of my own, and time and treasure at my command. I had everything I could want except the key to the story" (KW, 34). This resembles the situation of white middle-class women in the USA in the 1950s, as women had what was considered a perfect life with their big

house at the outskirts, their car and all their household commodities, but felt sad and empty with their boring lives. Women felt like that in the post-war period, when they were relegated back to the domestic field after having had the chance to work and do something productive with their lives apart from being a wife or a mother. They had explored their limits and encountered abilities in them that they did not know before, and after that they were brought back to the "golden cage" of a life with commodities but no excitements. The same happens with the protagonist of "The Tale of the Rose", who discovers what hard work is –after her father loses his fortune– and feels that the comfy life, full of treasures and commodities, that the Beast offers her is not enough, she needs to unveil the mystery of the Beast, she needs a challenge, she needs knowledge. Nevertheless, even though their feelings of incompleteness are the same, the motivations of the protagonist are slightly different from those of the US women in the 1950s. Both of them feel oppressed by social norms, but in the case of the protagonist of "The Tale of the Rose" she finds happiness in her new home because the Beast offers her not the limitations of a child-rearing role but access to literature and knowledge. Indeed, by citing Virginia Woolf's famous phrase –"I had a room of my own"– the narrator significantly acknowledges her own fulfilment in terms of the feminist demands exposed in the English author's well-known essay.

"The Tale of the Rose" presents the evolution of the protagonist in terms of women's empowerment and independence, and near the end, we discover a determined woman, able to take her own decisions, and that is the reason why she decides to come back to the castle and discover the truth behind the Beast: "This time I asked no permission to anyone" (KW, 38). This inner evolution that she experiences can be interpreted as the removal of any prejudices and ideals instilled by tradition, and it is what allows her to see the Beast as it really is and understand everything: the Beast is no

monster but a woman like her, only that she decided to hide her appearance in order not to be misjudged by society and also be free to live her life according to her own desires. Even though at first it is difficult for the protagonist to understand why a queen would leave her privileges and pretend to be a monster, she finally understands that the queen was tired of following the established rules, of being forced to marry a man who she did not love and who would never see her as the intelligent and talented woman that she was instead of just a pretty face with a nobility title: "knowing no one who could see her true face, she made a mask and from then on showed her face to no one" (KW, 40). This poses the question of the value of being yourself even if that carries along the misjudgement of the people –and even their hate– in order to live a happy and fulfilled life. This tale brings to the fore the importance for women to fight for their rights and seek for their true self, never minding the consequences and the prejudices society might have against this.

In the "Tale of the Voice" the protagonist is more reluctant to hear what the witch advises her, and will only learn the real value of things by suffering. From the moment in which the protagonist and the witch meet, the witch tries to warn her of the suffering she will encounter in her pursuit of a man's love. The protagonist undervalues herself and wants to change the whole of her in order to catch the attention and the love of a man that she has never spoken with: "You must change me first. Make me better. Make me right. Make me like a women he could love" (KW, 192). However, the witch tries to make her understand that she has nothing wrong and that if she wants to change, it must be for herself, not for whatever she imagines could please an unknown man: "*Change for your own sake, if you must, not for what you imagine another will ask you for*" (KW, 192). Yet, the protagonist believes that the only way that a rich man like him can set eyes on her is for beauty, by receiving a magical spell that will make her look

better. Even though she receives no spell, the "prince" is attracted to her, because of her natural beauty and her confidence, but the protagonist soon discovers that this is not enough. She wants to marry him, but she can't use her voice to pose the question, and she sadly realises she will not be able to hold him just with smiles and sex: "This was the first time I felt the loss of my voice" (KW, 198). In this tale the voice does not refer only to the physical idea, but also symbolizes opinion, and therefore it emphasizes the idea of the importance of having your own voice, being smart and having no fear to express yourself, because women without "voice" are completely dependent on men, as happens to the protagonist, who has to stay with the "prince" even though he has been unfaithful to her. "The Tale of the Voice" also serves as criticism to all the women that consent to these "passive women" traditional ideals and conform to them. The protagonist describes with sadness and surprise how all women at the parties were just dancing, sighing, smiling. She asks herself if they are also under a spell. Ironically, it is by seeing her attitude and actions reflected in other women that she realizes it is not the correct way to do things.

Only when the protagonist realizes that having a voice of her own is very important to achieve respect, freedom and a future, does she decide to come back with her family. When she visits the witch again, the latter explains that she has always had her own voice, it was herself who decided not to use it: "Wish to speak and you will speak, girl. Wish to die and you can do it. Wish to live and here you are. [...] The music you make has always been in your own power" (KW, 202, 203). This is a call to arms to all women to find their own voices, as the power to decide over their lives, over their opinion and over their art is inside them. This idea is characteristic of feminists like Simone de Beauvoir, who insisted on the importance of women finding their own voices and the necessity of the recovery and expansion of a female literature –and other

arts. Even though the protagonist has to learn this "lesson" by hard, the witch is the figure that constantly reinforces the power and independence of women, both with her words and her attitude, trying to help the protagonist by destroying the rivalry between women that is traditional in classic fairy tales.

In the last tale, "The Tale of the Kiss", Donoghue explores further the ideology of the witch and what has led her to be what she is like. The way in which the witch is described, her actions and thoughts make us see that she is a normal human being, with nothing supernatural to make her a witch. Instead of that, she is portrayed like a wise woman, who makes the most of the life she has to live and pursues her happiness by diverting from traditional social rules. She finds happiness living in a cave because that makes her free and gives her time to think, without obligations dictated by her gender: "I had time to wonder now, to unpick the knotted ropes of my thoughts. I could taste freedom like salt on the breeze. There was no one to nurse, no one to feed, no one to listen to but my own self" (KW, 209). She is somehow isolated by society for being different, but she finds happiness and power in being apart from traditional society – especially in terms of gender rules: "What I found instead was power. I never sought it; it was left out for me to stumble over" (KW, 209). This reinforces the idea that women have power, but have to learn how to find it and not to restrict themselves; the witch needs to distance herself from social restrictions in order to find it, to see all the power and potential that resides inside her.

However, "The Tale of the Voice" also exposes the downsides of the witch's situation, her feeling of solitude and sadness for being misunderstood, even fear for the reprisals that villagers, who represent society, might take against her: "I knew there were some in the village below who, after strong liquor, talked of blocking up my cave in the night" (KW, 218, 219). However, as the tale ends, and having read the "Tale of

the Voice" before, we get to know that this freedom, being able to live her life according to her ideals and being herself, is for her more important than anything else, and she overcomes the fear of being rejected by society and embraces her life of independence, trying to help other women to find this female empowerment. This is exposed in the pieces of advice that the witch gives to the mother and the father of a young girl that come to her cave searching for help to tame their daughter: the mother wants the girl to stay with her and the father wants his daughter to marry a friend of his. The daughter appears at her cave and the witch is touched with the things she tells her. After that, the witch lies to the parents, telling them that if they command their daughter to do what they want, a terrible curse will haunt her. The witch wants to help the girl, because she knows she is special, she sees the world in a different way. Thus, the witch advises the girl to choose what she wants to do with her life, to take her time to think and experience until she finds her own path. Therefore, the witch is a prompter of female independence, not only because she is a feminist, but also because she sees herself reflected on the girl and does not want her to live an empty unhappy life.



#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Fairy tales are powerful ideological tools given their simple style and plot, which make them suitable for all readers or for their oral transmission, prompting worldwide expansion and endurance. Generation after generation, fairy tales have been transmitted and many versions have emerged, but the essential elements that make them identifiable have survived. For centuries, these tales have been very influential in the consolidation and preservation of patriarchal ideals and social order. The most important elements that sustained a male-centred society were those that constituted the constructions of female characters. Most of the fairy tales that became popular and have survived until the present days were written by men, so traditional fairy tales present female characters from a male perspective, never enabling them to have their own voice. Indeed, the good female characters are described as quiet and passive –and, of course, very beautiful and young– equating silence with virtue. Presented by means of reductionist binaries, the "virtuous" female characters received features in contrast with those of the other female characters who were "wicked". This polarized conception of women transmitted the idea that girls are either good, beautiful, young, silent and obedient or evil, ugly and dangerous. Furthermore, the happy ending of most traditional tales consisted on achieving heterosexual love, marriage being the ultimate prompter of happiness.

After the flourish of feminism, many feminist writers focused their attention on literature –a realm that had been mainly male– and its representation of women. They wanted to dismantle the stereotypes that literature had transmitted, and a way to do so was rewriting the canon. That is what happened with tales: a vast amount of fairy tale rewritings were written by different authors, some of them just upended patriarchal for matriarchal or changed the gender of the characters; others –like Donoghue's

rewritings– offered a whole new perspective on gender. Donoghue's retellings do not pretend to revert female stereotypes by demonizing men, but by showing the tales from multiple female protagonists' perspectives, showing the complexities of the characters that have been traditionally reduced to binaries. The protagonists are not reduced to the traditional stereotype of the beautiful, young, kind-hearted girl with –more often than not– fair hair. In her collection, Donoghue offers a wide variety of female protagonists, each different from the previous, each with a different character, aspirations and story. Besides, the author does not only include a rich representation of them but also a completely renewed view of the witch. The wicked female characters of traditional tales served to consolidate female rivalry, as they were presented as jealous of the beautiful and young protagonists, willing to do anything to hinder the protagonist's happiness. Donoghue depicts witches as very humane characters who, far from trying to make the protagonists miserable, want to help them to find their path in life, learning to value themselves, their freedom and intelligence.

In traditional fairy tales, the female protagonists are usually depicted as passive and silent –as very positive qualities– women who do not control their lives, but wait for a man to save them. In Donoghue's retellings, the female protagonists do not only drive the action of the tales, but also save themselves from undesirable situations in which, more often than not, are put because of men. Nevertheless, the ultimate prompter of difficulties is the protagonists' belief in traditional ideals which they have learned from tales or myths that people tell them. The protagonists of "The Tale of the Rose" and "The Tale of the Voice" have to overcome the ideological "bubble" in which they have grown up, shaped by what they have learned from what others tell them. In order to reach a happy ending, they do not need a wedding: they need illumination. The key to their happiness is knowledge: they need to forget all the prejudices and preconceptions

they know and see the world in a different light, outside social norms. In the three tales analysed, the witch is the character that guides them through their evolution towards finding their own identity, no longer restrained by patriarchal ideas.

The character of the witch –and the Beast– in the three tales could be considered feminist: she is rejected by society because she does not conform to the patriarchal rules, she thinks different and is therefore considered a threat to the established order, which leads to her demonization and marginalization. That is what happened –and sometimes still happens– with feminists, who had to come across a very difficult path towards gender equality. Witches are beautifully depicted as very humane and complex characters, who are strong enough to ignore social pressure and want to help other women to find their own paths, too. The witches are wise and value intelligence and freedom over anything else. To guide the protagonists to their evolution, witches do not try to instil their ideals into the minds of the protagonists as society has traditionally done; they let them live the experience and learn by themselves, so that their evolution comes from them, thus enhancing their independence.

All in all, Donoghue's retellings offer an innovative conception of the female gender in a wide sense, with diverse and very humane characters that, being detached from magical elements characteristic of fairy tales, make it possible for most girls to feel identified with them. By preserving some of the distinguishing features of fairy tales, Donoghue makes the readers question what they know about fairy tales. In the analysed tales from *Kissing the Witch*, the protagonists are often misled by their preconceptions and beliefs created by what they have been told by people or fairy tales. Donoghue uses this metafictional resource to call the reader's attention to the fact that the Master Narratives are just constructions, and in the case of fairy tales, very simplistic constructions that reduced women to the opposition between the good,

beautiful and young "princess" and the ugly, old and evil "witch", extrapolating the relationship between women to that of rivalry. Because of that, Donoghue includes a renewed vision of the relationship between women, including homosexual love, but especially emphasizing the fellowship and help between women, witches being the feminist figure that prompts female empowerment, independence and the evolution of the protagonists.

Thus, we can consider Donoghue's retellings as a beautiful reinterpretation of fairy tales, which is more adequate to the present times and which helps to reinforce the ideas of equality and plurality. She demolishes the negative stereotypes that fairy tales have created –especially concerning women– in order to create stories with a deeper meaning, not based on archetypes and binaries. Her tales are about the development of the protagonists, their internal growth and evolution in which they learn to judge things for themselves and choose their own path. Even though they are advised by the "witches", the protagonists lead their own realisation, learning to be independent and free women, liberated from the chains of social prejudices.

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