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*The Gospel According to Blindboy: Masculinity,  
Mental Health, and Social Criticism in Blindboy  
Boatclub's short stories*

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## **Abstract**

In the Post-Celtic Tiger years, many Irish writers have continued experimenting with fictional literature, since after the economic crash most of the Irish novels focused on historical fiction or commercial fiction. Nevertheless, the need to expose the reality of Irish society has led to the introduction of different stylistic devices, such as satire, to add a critical undertone to those novels. Blindboy Boatclub's *The Gospel According to Blindboy in 15 Short Stories* relies on humour and satire to criticise different aspects of contemporary Irish society. This essay will analyse Blindboy's social criticism in some of his stories towards the hegemonic concept of masculinity, as well as the invisibility in Irish institutions and society of people dealing with mental health problems. This analysis will expose how, using humour and satire, Blindboy drives the readers to question the ideal of manliness rooted in the Irish culture, and the helpless situation of those suffering from mental health conditions.

## **Key words**

Blindboy, Irish literature, masculinity, mental health, social criticism

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## Introduction

As Claire Kilroy explains, “there was a very strong literary movement during the Celtic Tiger” (Lozano 2018, 159). The rapid economic growth of the country during the mid 1990s and the late 2000s favoured the cultural and literary expansion. Historical fiction as a genre had a great impact in Irish literature, and after the boom collapsed “the stories started coming out because now we have a story” (159). Some scholars argue that contemporary Irish novels are stuck in the past and that “Irish literature does not engage sufficiently with its Celtic Tiger present” (Cahill 2011, 6). Nevertheless, during the past few years, new Irish writers have appeared, leaving behind the conservative writing, and publishing their novels on new topics. Satire and humour have become two important stylistic devices in these fictional novels. Irish literature has also flourished thanks to the successful writings of female authors. Blindboy Boatclub is one of those writers who managed to move further from historical fiction. Blindboy started his career in the Rubberbandits. Himself and Mr Chrome are an Irish comedy duo known for their “satirical and musical comedy” and their “localisation of rap and hip-hop genres to the context of Limerick city (Ireland) and its putative voice in their music” (Vaughan and Moriarty 2018, 13). Another interesting fact about this duo is that, although their actual identities are known, they use plastic bags to cover their faces and alter egos during performances or interviews. Their musical video “Horse Outside” was number one spot in the Irish music sales chart in 2010 (21), and after that they became well-known celebrities, nationally and internationally. In 2017 Blindboy published his book *The Gospel According to Blindboy in 15 Short Stories*, and it has been number one of bestsellers in Irish fiction for the past two years. Its enormous popularity may in part be due to its controversial reception. Blindboy not only uses explicit and very detailed descriptions of his characters and the events that happen in his writing, which do not go unnoticed to the readers, but also raises concerns on certain social problems the author considers urgent for Irish society to address.

The two most recurrent issues explored in the short stories in this collection are those that revolve around the pervasiveness of patriarchal constructions of masculinity in contemporary Ireland, as well as the institutional and social invisibility of mental health problems. This paper will examine how Blindboy’s short stories make the readers question the hegemonic concept of masculinity and its characteristics, as well as the scarce importance

given to people dealing with mental health problems by the Irish society and institutions. This essay will analyse those short stories in *The Gospel According to Blindboy* that directly address the problematics of masculinity and mental health in 21st century Ireland, in order to examine how the author's use of satire gives shape to an incisive form of social criticism that has prompted public debate. This analysis will be divided in two sections: the first one will explore how different articulations of the term "masculinity" are represented in the collection, based on works from prominent authors such as Debbie Ging in the *Irish Journal of Sociology*, and Caroline Magennis. The second section will be devoted to the study of the recurrent presence of characters who suffer from mental health conditions which are willingly ignored by both society and institutions. Studies from the Mental Health Commission and the Health Research Board will provide statistics, through the work of professionals like Eamon O'Shean and Donna Doherty. In both sections, the use of satire and humour play a crucial role for the building up of the collection's social criticism.

## **What makes you a man? Problematics on the concept of masculinity**

The issue of masculinity as a social construction and its impact on men's sense of selves is an important aspect in many of Blindboy's short stories. Each story that deals with this topic focuses on a different aspect associated with the hegemonic concept of manliness. The main characters of the first short story analysed in this essay are two historical figures who have been central to the Irish revolution. As Caroline Magennis explains, "the mode of masculinity that has been most often presented [...] is that of paramilitary groups and their members, where masculinity is inextricably tied to violence and issues of national struggle" (Magennis 2010, 7). Indeed, the characters in the story are important revolutionary figures, but Blindboy uses them to stretch the traditional concept of masculinity represented by these characters to a whole new level. In the second story of this block the idea of masculinity is centered in the male figure as a hero from an action film or, at least, his intention is to become one, and the figure of a wealthy Chinese man, which represents the idea of masculine power through economic control.

In *The Gospel According to Blindboy in 15 Short Stories*, most of the protagonists of the stories are men who do not respond to conventional patriarchal models of masculinity as associated with, for instance, toughness and courage. "Arse Children" is the best story in the book which deals with the problematic of masculinity. In the first part of this fictional story Eamon De Valera, an influential Irish politician and later president of the Republic of Ireland, and Michael Collins, leader of the Irish revolution for independence during the early 1920s, create an army in order to kill The Cairo Gang, a group of British intelligence agents who were sent to Dublin to stop the Irish revolution. This army was created through sexual intercourse between the two men, and De Valera, who had been granted a womb by "Our Lady", with the help of the Carmelite Order to have the "ability to give birth" (Boatclub 2018, 118), and so he miraculously delivered the children one week later, being these adults and trained assassins by the time of giving birth. The fact that two males have explicit sexual relationships, described in very much detail in the story, and in addition, that these two men are the most important political figures in the Irish revolution, is a very transgressive authorial decision. Historical figures, and even more, revolutionary figures, have been and still are considered to be role models for society. Blindboy himself explains in one of his

podcasts the purpose of this story, saying that he “found it surreal, and hilarious, and funny to use totems of Irish republicanism and see how far can you stretch it, how crazy can you make it” (Blindboy 2019, 22:50). By putting these historical figures in a context no one would ever imagine, such as an homosexual relationships, is a way of exposing how the hegemonic concept of masculinity is constructed and persists in the Irish contemporary culture.

Nevertheless, Blindboy does not want to simply create controversy through this subversive interpretation of history which he describes as “hyperrealism”, since he is “playing with the different totems of masculinity, because they are detached from their actual meaning” (23:50). He tries to explain what masculinity means to him and to a whole generation which grew up with specific male figures as role models, and who they considered to be the utmost representation of masculinity: “Back to Rubberbandits, when I was fifteen, sixteen, I’ve always been fascinated, deeply, deeply fascinated with figures of Irish republicanism: the IRA, Michael Collins, De Valera” (18:40). Blindboy claims that “these were signifiers of Irish manliness, and being tough, and being hard” (19:25). As teenagers, Blindboy and his friends would associate the concept of manliness with republican figures like De Valera or Collins because at that time politics and the IRA were quite present in everyone’s daily lives, down in the so called “free South”. Blindboy explains that they “would write ‘IRA’ on a wall or a bus stop and wouldn’t even know what it meant. We just know this is what you write when you’re a teenager, and you’re trying to find your masculinity” (20:12). The concept of masculinity for them was not a feeling that every boy and man built individually, but rather a sense of shared manliness. A way of behaviour, determined by a group of people. Following those practices or not would define their degree of masculinity.

It can be suggested from Blindboy’s explanations in his podcast that many of the characteristics which have to do with masculinity are also related to physical characteristics, since he described the IRA and the political figures as “big men with guns” (Blindboy 2019, 20:32). Being tough and hard has much to do with being violent and aggressive, using one’s own body and strength. According to Susan Cahill, “to focus on the body is to ask how it matters: materialist criticism insists that we pay attention to how bodies are configured and what impact this might have for embodied individuals” (Cahill 2011, 2). That is, the body we live in and how it is read by society has a profound impact on our relationships with ourselves and others, as well as on the lives we lead. It also has to do with what we do with

our body, and what kind of impact that has on others and on ourselves. Eamon De Valera and Michael Collins were the embodiment of what masculinity looked like, especially Collins who has always been portrayed as a young, handsome and brave man. Along with that, they also embodied an ideology, because the Irish revolution was successful thanks to them. People took these male figures as role models, as a goal to achieve. To pervert such important historical figures can raise concern and anger amongst people, as it is depicted in the second part of the story: the anonymous writer of the fictional story about De Valera and Collins is traced by the angry readers and murdered by a violent mob of people in his own house.

Satire and humour are frequently used by Blindboy to criticise culturally accepted ideas and so, he makes the readers question different social behaviours and mindsets. According to Hight, satire “pictures real men and women, often in lurid colors, but always with unforgettable clarity” (Hight 1972, 3). Blindboy tries to portray contemporary characters which perpetuate the hegemonic conventions of masculinity in order to protect Collins and De Valera’s image as national heroes. In the story, when tracing the location of the anonymous writer for his detention, there is an old lady between the crowd outside the writer’s house who shouts in a strong local accent: “He insulted Our Lady, he’s the divil. He should be dragged out here and gutted like a lamb and offered to the Immaculate Heart” (Boatclub 2018, 149). Blindboy uses “the bold and vivid language” (Hight 1972, 3) of an elderly, provincial woman to expose the limitations that freedom of speech has when the ideas presented clash with those imposed by society, such as the concept of masculinity applied to nationally emblematic figures. There are also several referencies to social media devices, such as Twitter, Facebook or Reddit, through which the haters are able to communicate and spread their hatred towards the writer to more people. Blindboy emphasizes the crucial role of the Internet and online means of communication, because they create a sense of community, in the same way history or religion do. A virtual safe space where people’s ideals are rooted and unshakable.

The heroic male figure is also present in another of Blindboy’s stories as a problematic trait of masculinity. The main character in “Hugged-Up Studded Blood-Puppet” is a young drug addict who wants to infiltrate a Chinese den located on top of a Chinese restaurant to dismantle their illegal market of cannabis. Being under the influence of that same drug, he imagines his heroic attempt to save the slaves working there for the Chinese gang and restore the peace in his town: “His mind fizzles adrenal with all sorts of possibilities. Him

bare-chested and steaming, climbing up the vent. [...] Landing in the middle of the illegal hash den like Steven Seagal” (Boatclub 2018, 74-75). He is obsessed with karate films, but not because of the sport, but because of the heroic protagonists starring those films. They are considered role models, the embodiment of masculinity, and anyone who wants to be a “real white saviour” (75), a real hero, should emulate their actions and behaviour. Studies have shown that the audience of action films is “generally keen to show that they did not take action heroes seriously” (Ging 2005, 38). However, Blindboy stretches once more the boundaries of fiction and not only does he make his character behave in a heroic way, but also presents a tragic ending for him. The protagonist is kidnapped by the Chinese mafia and taken to China, where the leader of the gang tricks him into thinking that they are going to make him an action film star. In the end, the Chinese lider uses the protagonist as bait to imprison a Chinise bank director who owed him money.

The Chinese bank director, Masatoshi Busujima, is another character which embodies traits of the dominant ideal of masculinity, but he portrays the negative, even disagreeable characteristics of manliness. Theoretical explanations of the concept of masculinity state that “the successful and competent male is measured with the yardstick of power and material acquisition” (Philaretou and Allen 2001, 304). Busujima is a character that has surpassed those characteristics. He is described as “one of those creeps who’s so rich that every conventional desire a person could have is at his fingertips, so he must continually test his own boundaries to get the horn and feel alive” (Boatclub 2018, 83). His economic power is so limitless that he can buy anything he wants, even pay people to make his most deprived sexual desires come true. Blindboy uses this character to question the hegemonic ideal of masculinity, which applies to this kind of perverse people.

## **The invisible illness: mental health issues**

Mental health issues are another controversial topic in Blindboy's short stories, since many of the characters present some kind of mental trauma or illness. Most of the time these issues pass unnoticed to the rest of the characters, which is a reflection of how invisible these conditions are to the contemporary society and institutions. Many studies blame this precarious situation to the scarce expenditure on mental health in Ireland, since the studies prove that "it has risen significantly, but the increase has been below that of other components of health care expenditure in the past twenty years" (O'Shea and Kennelly 2008, 4). Nevertheless, not only public and private institutions neglect people with mental health conditions, but also Irish society in general. In the first story analysed, the anonymous writer also suffered from mental health issues, but not even his parents were aware of it: "His tired parents, familiar with his manic behaviour but unaware of his previous suicide attempt, obliged and took the car out to Dalkey for an evening walk" (Boatclub 2018, 147). Blindboy exposes different mental health conditions in his stories. The first story to be analysed focuses on the consequences of dealing with mental health problems on your own. The second story explains the unconscious trauma from past events that can be the source of mental health issues, discovered with the help of a professional.

Mental health conditions often lead to physical conditions. Since the mind controls the body, the first one tries to release some of the pressure by exposing it physically, letting us know that something is not working correctly. The protagonist of "Scaphism" has epileptic fits, and he explains that before getting one, "a taste of metal would arrive in my mouth" (Boatclub 2018, 4). But those epileptic fits were caused by the view of his exgirlfriend with another man. His mental health problem was triggered by outside factors, and even though he knew this fact, he repeatedly put himself in the same situation that triggers his condition. It can be said that insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expect different results, but the fact is that insanity is also a mental illness. This term applies perfectly in this case, because the protagonist triggered so many times his epilepsy, that at the end of the story he murders his exgirlfriend's boyfriend using an ancient Persian torture method called 'scaphism'. Blindboy does not want to tell the story of a madman, but he tries to make his readers understand that there are people who suffer from serious mental illnesses, and they

are not able to overcome these problems on their own. The protagonist killed the man because that was the only possible solution he could think of to resolve his condition and stop having epileptic fits.

Professional help is always recommended when dealing with mental health problems, although sometimes not even that is not enough. Studies report that “389,258 people in the Republic of Ireland are experiencing minor or major psychiatric problems at any given point in time”, which means that “12 in every 100 people aged 18 years and over who are experiencing mild to severe mental health problems” (Doherty, Moran and Kartalova 2008, 11). It is the case the protagonist from the second story suffers from agoraphobia and anxiety. Her mental illnesses starts when she was 18 years old, and she went through a rough process. She felt an irrational fear by imagining all the possible situations that could go wrong in her daily life. She knew that her mind was not functioning correctly, because those were fictional situations, made up by her brain, although they felt “as real as if [they were] happening” (Boatclub 2018, 38). Finally, she decided to ask for help from her parents, who would later contact her university’s counsellor. He managed to trace the source of her anxiety, a traumatic moment in her childhood. The accidental death of her younger brother when she was only 4 years old marked her immature brain, and made her feel vulnerable to any uncontrolled situations. Her anxiety and agoraphobia only surfaced when she became an adult because that is the age when people start to make decisions of their own, and to take risks. Her mental illnesses where only a way of self-defense her brain activated when being in stressful situations. This story is the only one that has a character who helps the distressed protagonist with her mental problems. Blindboy exposes that professional help will ease the process of recovery from mental health conditions. At the end of the story, Blindboy adds a note of humour by mentioning the actor Sam Neil in his story. He will be the protagonist’s imaginary friend, who will help her get through her first trip alone.

## Conclusion

Irish literature in the Post-Celtic Tiger has experienced many changes, from its variety of topics to the increasing number of Irish authors. *The Gospel According to Blindboy* presents a fresh point of view of Irish fictional novels. Blindboy's writing offers a different perception of social criticism. He makes the reader question contemporary problems that affect Irish society as a whole. His characters present many unconventional characteristics that are included in the concept of masculinity, and this makes people rethink the hegemonic discourse of what manliness means. Mental health issues, as proved in this paper, are also an urgent problem in Ireland. Blindboy is able to describe the characters' feelings in a way that makes the avid reader understand what people with mental health problems are going through, and so question the ability of Irish society and institutions to help these people. Blindboy's use of satire and humour links all the short stories in the book, although each story is completely different from the previous one. This kind of stimulating novels makes Irish literature worth reading and understanding.

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