RENDERINGS OF EMPATHY IN CLAIRE KEEGAN'S LITERARY WORK

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Abstract: *The article aims at examining the way in which the concept of empathy is dealt with in the literary work of Irish writer Claire Keegan. It will show how empathy can lend a helping hand when it comes to issues such as abandonment, trauma, guilt, or oppressive silence and how it can function as a balm for personal and societal wounds. In the first part, I will make a short introduction of Claire Keegan's work and its place in the modern Irish literature. In the second part, I will focus on a nuanced conceptual definition of empathy, as posited by critic Eric Leake, who identifies three modes of empathy: easy empathy, difficult empathy, and critical empathy. Finally, I will use Leake's critical lenses to discuss how empathy and its healing role are rendered in Claire Keegan's novella* Small Things like These.

Keywords: *empathy; short story; Claire Keegan; Magdalene stories; contemporary Irish literature.*

Claire Keegan and her place in the Irish literary canon

Claire Keegan is a contemporary Irish writer, born in 1968. She wrote two collections of short stories, *Antarctica* (1999) and *Walk the Blue Fields* (2007), and three full-length novellas: *Foster* (2010), *Small Things like These* (2021), and *So Late in the Day* (2022). Far from being a prolific writer, she is, nevertheless, considered a pre-eminent figure of Irish contemporary literature, translated into more than thirty languages, including Romanian. She won the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature in 2010; in 2022 *Small Things like These* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. *Foster* and *Small Things like These* were each adapted into a film.

Claire Keegan's stories tackle difficult themes such as loss, death, abandonment, domestic violence, oppressive silence, unrequited love, family dysfunctionality. These stories are often about lack of empathy: she imagines characters who suffer not only due to the inherent tribulations of life, but also because of the terrible treatments inflicted on them by their fellow human beings. Nevertheless, at times, the same stories are, quite unexpectedly, about the redemptive quality of empathy; they feature characters who witness tragedies and take a stand, which restores the hope that not all good is lost in this world. They also put forth characters who provide better attitudinal models to follow, and, therefore, become inspirational; thus, both readers and characters acquire a better furnished interior life, a psychological life in which

more reasonable choices, more profound understanding of the complexity of the world, and more mature responses to outer events become possible.

Keegan's favourite type of prose is the short story, whose conciseness calls for essentialization, but does not detract from boldness in terms of message and a sense of completeness. She also delved into its adjacent form, the novella, a genre to be found somewhere between the short story and the novel, long enough to provide the writer with more plot complexity but brief enough to keep the reader's attention on one single major event depicted in the story. She confesses she has a soft spot for the delicacy and the subtleness deriving from the restrictive nature of this form: "There is a strictness about it which I really admire […] the short story is like a poem in that there is nothing lost. Everything is savoured." (Keegan in Meade 48).

One obvious consequence of the conciseness of the genre is that the plot is, by default, less intricate than that of a novel, it does not unfold on multiple layers, but it rather has a basic core around which the story is built, one incident that becomes heavy with meaning and nuances. This calls for other prerequisites to be in place, such as "a strong degree of focus and unity to carry the reader from the opening lines to the ending" (D'hoker: 2016 13). In their turn, readers are supposed to bring their share in the construction of the story, as this genre, more than others, seems to invite them to fill in the gaps, and to pay close attention to what is not said. Claire Keegan herself points out to this interplay between what is said and what is left out:

> You are truly saying very little. People say very little anyway. We talk a great deal, of course, but we actually say very little to each other. I think the short story is a very fine place to explore that silence between people, and the loneliness between people and the love that is there. And I think they all come organically out of the short story. (Keegan in D'hoker 2016, 160)

Another consequence of this brevity is the fact that the techniques used to achieve economy (understatement, omission, condensation) are mirrored on the thematic level, namely "critics too have often suggested that the short story's laconic nature makes it the ideal form to stage the secrets, taboos and traumas that haunt people, families and communities, particularly in an Irish context" (D'hoker in Caneda-Cabrera and Carregal-Romero 88). Thus, the short story, as short as it may be, manages to deal with profound, serious matters, whose heaviness and intricacies are revealed in bits and pieces, and whose secrecy is often punctured by fleeting glimpses into the raw depth of the human psyche, where inspirational beauty and abhorrent ugliness intermingle to show the mosaics of human nature. The range of topics it manages to cover is astounding and it reflects the complexity of a society that has lived its historical challenges to the fullest; artists draw on the latter to reveal hidden truths, sometimes to restore justice (albeit on a symbolic level),

sometimes to warn against the fact that history could repeat at any time, but also to illuminate acts of courage, instances of empathy, and the delicate variegated pattern of the human soul.

In her turn, Claire Keegen is indeed a child of her time. As already mentioned, her interests range from family relationships to the individual's relationship with the society s/he lives in; she delves into complex topics such as imbalance of power, emotionally starved families living in communities that foster secrecy and abuse, double standards of morality, love and loss. Her style has been described as modern realism, in as much as her stories take place in recognizable settings with contemporary references and they feature quite ordinary people and their day-to-day struggles. Social commentaries pervade the descriptions of the contexts where the plots are built, and they give a glimpse into the most important issues that concern the society of the time. The characters featured in her stories are normal people with normal lives who undergo various types of crises that make them face unexpected dilemmas; this suddenly turns the whole narrative into something quite out of the ordinary, meant to shed light on a hitherto hidden truth. As critics have remarked, this has become

> the well-known hallmark of the modern short story, the moment of heightened understanding or quiet revelation often functions as the climax of the short story, as a new insight given to the character, the reader or both. (D'hoker in Caneda-Cabrera and Carregal-Romero 93)

Despite infusing her stories with realistic details, Keegan does not forsake the legacy of the Irish oral tradition, and this results into "an interesting hybrid mixture of the ordinary and the supernatural, of folktale elements and psychological realism." (Fizgerald in D'hoker & Eggermont 180), a "blending of tradition and superstition with modernity, in such a way that boundaries are blurred, and the reader is left confused with the characters' temporal dimension" (Morales-Ladron 276). This mixture often gives her texts a tinge of surrealism, a feeling that the world is constantly escaping one's comprehension; we sense that, beyond the well-established norms that are there in the open to be followed, this world is somehow governed by intricate, obscure laws one is never able to pinpoint to the full. Thus, major human experiences such as love, loss, transcendence or death are sometimes accompanied by premonitory signs or eerie twists of plot, which, in their turn, enrich the reader's experience as a receptor of the story. Therefore, although apparently writing about unexceptional characters set in unexceptional surroundings, in an apparently quiet, laconic, realistic style, Keegan manages to create subtle microworlds able to stir up complex feelings; this is another special characteristic that accounts for the popularity of her stories. One of the

many emotions she capitalizes on is empathy and this will be discussed in the next part of the article.

Empathy: definitions and trends

Over the last decade, the concept of empathy has captured the interest of the public and it has become almost impossible to avoid in any discourse on any kind of human relationship; it is likely to be mentioned anywhere ranging from the relationship with the ethnical Other in the domain of intercultural communication, to the relationship with oneself, in the domain of psychology, or even the humanity's relation with Nature, in the context of climate change, to mention just a few examples. In academia, it has benefited from nuanced interdisciplinary research and it has grown in importance in domains such as moral philosophy, cognitive literary studies, education, neuroscience, anthropology (Leake 6). As empathy has gained momentum in our contemporary frame of mind, it has also started to spark numerous debates on a clear definition of the term and on the reason why it has become interesting at this time rather than another. As the concept has become more refined, scholars have also looked into its negative side, concerned with the likelihood that it might be devoid of substance or in conflict with other values such as objectiveness or fairness, or the fear that "empathy alone, and empathy unsupported by other measures and unaware of its own limitations and biases, does not solve things" (Leake 2).

While the word "empathy" gets thrown around in many social contexts, from political official discourses to day-to-day conversations, and seems to have become very trendy, it still generates numerous questions related both to its nature and to the most efficient way to acquire or to increase it. Is it innate, as the theory of mirror neurons posits? This would leave no room for improvement for those who want to be more empathetic. Or is it something that one can learn? Oscar winning actor Cillian Murphy, who played the leading role in the 2024 film adaptation of Keegan's *Small Things like These*, is convinced that the latter is indeed the case, especially since he realized that inhabiting somebody else's inner world is in fact the foundation of the acting profession:

> The trick seems to be to work on it. To activate it. To make a connection. To listen. Like learning an instrument or writing a story… like a good meditation. All of these things can be taught and can be learnt, and the same is true of empathy. (Murphy 5)

Therefore, with increased self-awareness and willingness to lend a more attentive ear to others, one can become more attuned to the needs and sufferance of their fellow-beings and dare to delve into courageous acts of

salvation, like Keegan's protagonist did in the novella to be discussed later in this article.

If one is after self-actualization and spiritual and psychological enrichment, empathy is an experience to be desired, but it needs to be approached with caution, as it may trigger unexpected outcomes. Sometimes, empathy is defined in quite neutral terms as done by Susan Keen in her research on whether reading fiction can increase empathy and induce more altruistic behaviours in the real world; thus, she believes empathy to be "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect that can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading" (Keen 2008). Some other times, empathy is considered in more dramatic terms. It is the case of Irish novelist Colum McCann who warns prospective writers eager to embark on the empathy journey through fiction writing:

> The only true way to expand your world is to inhabit an otherness beyond ourselves. There is one simple word for this: empathy. Don't let them fool you. Empathy is violent. Empathy is tough. Empathy can rip you open. Once you go there, you can be changed… We find in others the ongoing of ourselves. (McCann 12)

As Keegan proves in her short story, empathy may indeed cause inner conflicts that can be heartbreaking and uplifting at the same time, and the way in which one's life may be transformed is often difficult to envisage.

In his book *Difficult Empathy and Rhetorical Encounters,* Eric Leake posits that there are three types of empathy. The first one is "easy empathy", which tends to be self-serving, inasmuch as it fulfills the empathizer's need to feel good about themselves, and it is not followed by any commitment or concrete efforts to relieve the suffering of the one being empathized with. Thus,

> it does nothing to challenge social positions and instead can reinforce hierarchies…it is closely associated with pity, which is generally felt by the more powerful for the less so in ways that would reaffirm the social standing and goodness of the powerful. (Leake 10)

The second type of empathy is "difficult empathy", which asks for an effort to comprehend objectively the motivations and the existential contexts of people we dislike or even abhor, while simultaneously being ready to acknowledge our own flaws and the possibility that we become similar to our enemies, if put in similar situations. It is an exercise of self-reflection, as well as one of imagination, it is about asking oneself the hypothetical question: would I be better than them in an identical context? For this to happen, we also need to take into consideration personal life stories, historical context, social

pressure and even the notion of luck, which all contribute to the way in which a person may behave at a certain point. Therefore, difficult empathy is difficult precisely because it "challenges the empathizer's conceptions of themselves and others in ways that can make demands upon the empathizer...[it] can upset hierarchies otherwise reinscribed by easy empathy" (Leake 11).

Leake advocates for a third type of empathy, which he believes to correct the shortcomings of the first two types; thus, "critical empathy" entails more self-awareness (asking oneself questions about what one tends to empathize with and why, the nature, the biases, the costs and the benefits of one's empathy). It requires close interrogation of

> the conditions, limitations, and outcomes of an empathic encounter while also holding open the possibilities of that encounter. Critical empathy requires one to reflect upon one's own position as a participant in an empathic encounter, even if only as a witness. (Leake 118)

In the following section, I will show how Keegan's novella *Small Things like These* can be read through the lenses of Leake's view on empathy and highlight how the three modes of empathy he puts forth can be used for a deeper understanding of the piece of writing at hand.

Renderings of empathy in *Small Things like These*

Small Things like These is Keegan's best-known piece of fiction, for which she was awarded the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction in 2022. It tells the story of an ordinary man, made to face an out-of-the-ordinary situation, when he discovers the trauma inflicted on his fellow beings through the intricate set-up of institutional abuse within the Catholic church. Magdalene Laundries were mother and baby homes, organized around convents throughout Ireland, and they were supposed to offer shelter and education to their borderers. Instead, they turned out to be places of disgrace, hellish prisons for "fallen girls" (unmarried mothers, orphans, mentally ill women). Somewhere between 10,000 and 30,000 women were confined and forced into unpaid labour and thousands of babies died in these institutions which were finally closed in the 1990s. Although the state did eventually acknowledge its role in the ordeal, the issue of Magdalene Laundries remains a stain on Ireland's history and especially on the reputation of the Catholic church. Under its control, the forsaken women "were victims and scapegoats of collective judgement and the vehicles of purification, thus being the saviours of society" (Hakkioglu and Gunes 337).

Through her novella, Keegan joins the chorus of the writers embarked upon the journey of telling the Magdalene stories, in an attempt to understand the incomprehensible, to warn against the repetition of history, and to use art

as a balm for the societal wounds inflicted by this terrible episode in the history of the nation. The story features Bill Furlong, a coal merchant living in the small town of New Ross in the 1980s Ireland. A loving father of five, Bill is very attached to his work and his family. Although quite immersed in the uneventful routine of his daily existence and not prone to sophisticated intellectualization, he is a character with a rich psychological landscape, who ponders on the meaning of life and asks himself questions about the nature of good and evil. As such, he stands in sharp opposition to his wife, who is convinced that "all thinking does is bring you down" (Keegan 45), and "if you want to get on in this life, there are things you have to ignore" (Keegan 45). It is precisely the things one must ignore that will give Bill trouble, because in the end he will choose not to turn a blind eye to abuse, and, in a courageous act of empathy, he will open Pandora's box and shed light on an intricate maze of corruption and violence.

From the very beginning, the reader understands that Bill is an empathetic person. Small gestures of kindness sprinkled along the book are premonitory of the big gesture at the end: he offers a lift to a boy with a neglectful father, whom he does not judge, as he is aware that alcohol addiction is not to be blamed, but rather to be commiserated with; he gives away the change in his pocket, aware that people are in need; he agrees to let customers pay their debts later, in an indefinite future, aware that times are hard; he gives coal for free to the most unfortunate ones. Such behaviours are criticized by his wife, who embodies practicality and pragmatism and who calls him "soft-headed" (Keegan 45). But Bill cannot forget the models he had as a child. Born out of wedlock, he was taken care of by his mother in the house of a rich lady who did not shun the unfortunate young woman, like her own family did. While occasionally mocked because he did not have a father, he had a decent childhood, sheltered by the kindness of his protectress. Her piece of advice transformed into a value deeply engrained into Bill's psyche: "To get the best out of people, you must always treat them well, Mrs. Wilson used to say" (Keegan 7). Years later, he has the opportunity to see what his mother could have become if she had been denied empathy. Sarah, the teenage girl he finds locked in the shed of the town's convent, abused and neglected, longing for the child taken away from her, happens to bear the same name as his mother. Despite the fact that her name ("Princess" in Hebrew) heralds a bright future for her, she ends up in a Magdalene Laundry, due to falling pregnant and therefore becoming the shame of the family. Here, she joins the ranks of those who do the washing for the rich of the town in the convent where incarcerate women who "were expected to literally wash away their sins, just like Mary-Magdalene had washed Jesus's feet" (Sebbane).

Hence, at a symbolic level, Bill feels he has the chance to rescue his own mother from a disgraceful fate and to offer her a life of dignity and care.

Thus, empathy becomes the gift that keeps on giving throughout generations; as we understand, in their turn, Bill's daughters already show signs of their empathetic nature, through the "small things which needed to be done" (Keegan 10), and Bill's hope is that they will also do the big things needed to be done in life, in order for them to prove that they are decent, deeply spiritual people. For somebody like his wife decency is measured by means of financial wellbeing and a good education (which in New Ross is provided only by the church-controlled school), that is why any empathetic remark made by Bill with regard to the girls in the convent is met with anger and egocentric practicality and seen as a sign of carelessness:

> But if we just mind what we have here and stay on the right side of people and soldier on, none of ours will ever have to endure the likes of what them girls go through... It's only people with no children that can afford to be careless. (Keegan 45)

Instead, for somebody like Bill, decency is proven through the measure of one's altruistic capacities:

> Was there any point in being alive without helping one another? Was it possible to carry on along through all the years, the decades, through an entire life without once being brave enough to go against what was there and yet call yourself a Christian and face yourself in the mirror? (Keegan 108)

The clash between these two views can be read through the lens of the dichotomy "easy empathy" and "difficult empathy", as defined in the previous section. "Easy empathy" is exemplified by the attitude of the entire community of New Ross that celebrates Christmas, a time for giving and receiving. The members of the town gather to piously praise God during the mass, but there is an obvious contradiction between the humility and the urge to help preached by the church and the harsh realities revealed succinctly, through tiny, but powerful details: the contrast between the wealth of the mayor who arrives in his Mercedes and the child forced by hunger to drink milk out of the bowl of a neighbour's cat; the haughty posture of the nuns who stop to talk only to the well-off parents; the contrast between the immaculate interior of the convent and the shabbiness of its boarders; the contrast between the compassion that some people show when they talk under their breath about the abuse in the convent and their inaction; the contrast between the happy, well-dressed children living in big houses adorned for Christmas and the girl in the convent who asks Bill to take her to the river so that she can drown herself. All these highlight "the lack of religious coherence" (Perez-Vides 24) of the parishioners and the hypocrisy of a community for which "churchgoing, mass rites and liturgies have been traditionally more important than doing truly Christian actions for peers in need, contravening the ideas of Jesus Christ

himself" (Perez-Vides 25). As such, empathy is either downright faked or it remains an empty claim, and feelings are not translated into concrete measures able to change an abusive practice; on the contrary, it reinforces the divide between the distressed and the well-off, leaving the former alone in their misfortune and the latter smug about their magnanimity, thus engaging in easy empathy in which "self-centered feeling and social presentation take the place of action and critical reflection" (Leake 10), without any "commitment, significant effort, structural change, or a reappraisal of oneself and others" (Leake 10). In this sense, freeing the girl from the ordeal she goes though in the convent is not only about giving her a second chance to a decent life, but also about the fact that "Furlong, by extension, is also liberated from the yoke of social expectations and feigned religiosity" (Perez-Vides 23).

Next, I will argue that Bill is the only one in the story who is able to engage in an act of "difficult empathy", in Leake's understanding of the term. From the beginning, we understand that he is wired for complexity and psychological depth. He keeps pondering over the meaning of life, he feels acutely "the strain of being alive" (Keegan 53), he is a keen observer of the realities of the town he lives in and the struggles its dwellers go through, and their hardship does not leave him indifferent. He also acts upon his compassion, through the small gestures of kindness already mentioned above. His empathetic nature was shaped by his childhood experiences, when he was both a victim of other children's cruelty and a beneficiary of Mrs. Willlson's good grace. Unlike Eileen, for whom it is clear that the girls forsaken in the convent have nothing to do with them - "that's the point, she is not one of ours" (Keegan 45), he is able to make an effort of imagination and ask: "what if she were one of ours?" (Keegan 45). His wife is convinced that their daughters are nowhere near the fallen girls incarcerated in the convent, who are the morally impure Other, "who have brought trouble upon themselves" (Keegan 45); for her, empathy "is considered a gift, as something that should be reserved only for the deserving" (Leake 12). Thus, while Eileen "embodies the dissuasion from performing empathy that a close family member can oblige" (Perez-Vides 22), Bill knows there is only a wall separating the convent from the good school where his girls go, and that life is fragile and unpredictable. While his wife and others, like his neighbor Mrs. Kehoe, consider Bill "foolish" (Keegan 94) because of his moral dilemma, the readers may infer that, in fact, this dilemma is fueled by his recognition of what Leake calls a "shared humanity", namely he made "an effort toward understanding, grounded in a fundamental respect for human beings" (Leake 44). This effort stems from his awareness that, given the right circumstances, anyone might find themselves in the situations of those who are currently judged and rejected:

> It is important to note that difficult empathy requires recognizing similarities in the form of a shared basic humanity, that we all have the potential to suffer and are part of a greater human community, while not building upon that shared humanity shared identities that require the erasure of differences. (Leake 46)

Another characteristic of "difficult empathy" is that it changes the empathizer in unsuspected ways. As Leake posits:

> Difficult empathy requires us to understand ourselves and others in ways we might not want to recognize. It may move us to see the worst of others reflected in ourselves, and to see the best of ourselves also reflected in the worst of others. (Leake 44)

Readers sense that Bill is on a path of change well before his dramatic discovery of the abused girl. Besides his regular worries related to family and job matters, he is constantly plagued by an existential anxiety which is translated into his questions about other possibilities, alternative lives, or the roads he has not taken. After the abuse is discovered, the writer draws masterfully on the battle between his urge to act and the impulse to give up, like any other dweller in his town would have done. The internal conflict he goes through gradually grows in intensity and we witness the struggle of a new self to come to light. This conflict is natural: "Because a sense of self is always at stake, and because we feel a need to defend against threats to our identities, any rhetorical encounter that might challenge our sense of self becomes difficult" (Leake 1)

There is the man who would not want to mess around with the wrong people and get into trouble: "the ordinary part of him wished he'd never come near the place" (Keegan 59), "once more the ordinary part of him simply wanted to be rid of this and get on home" (Keegan 61); but there is also the awareness that something greater may await for him on the other side of action: "Was it possible the best bit of him was shining forth, and surfacing?" (Keegan108). A seemingly unimportant detail is revelatory about how tainted he feels after the encounter with Mother Superior who attempted to buy his silence with a generous Christmas gift: the assiduous way in which he cleans his hands after having taken the bribe, washing his sins away, like the girls in the convent: "What most tormented him… was how the girl had been handled while he was present and how he'd allowed that…and how he'd gone on, like a hypocrite, to the Mass" (Keegan 74). Thus, although he initially does not act upon his empathetic impulse to save the girl, and accepts the money instead, he feels dirty and ashamed, because this is "one of the features that makes empathy difficult, the risk of being changed in the process, the feeling of opening up one's identity in exposure to another." (Leake 92)

Another important moment in his transformative journey is the scene in which he gets lost on his way back home and he asks an old man for directions. An unexpected answer comes through: "This road will take you wherever you want, son" (Keegan 44); as such, it sounds like a piece of ancient wisdom, and it highlights the fact that life, while being chaotic and out of control, is also about the choices that we make. Thus, the old man, who seems the embodiment of an old mystical soul, and a tribute the writer pays to the supernatural motif in the Irish folk tales, gently nudges him to think about what he really wants to do with his life, given that he is at a major crossroad: to choose the guilt and shame of having connived with the perpetrators, or to endanger his family and his reputation by exposing the abuse. The final lines of the book show the effects of the decision he has eventually made, as he walks home with the girl:

> How light and tall he almost felt walking along with this girl at his side and some fresh, new, unrecognizable joy in his heart…never once in his whole and unremarkable life had he known a happiness akin to this […] he not only hoped but truly believed that they would manage. (Keegan 108)

Another reason why Bill may be said to engage in difficult empathy is the fact that his feelings lead him to actions that challenge well-established hierarchies, namely the illimited power of the church which gets away with abuse and reinforces patriarchal norms that chastise those who step outside the prescribed roles of femininity. Bill's defiance is captured in a short, but poignant question he asks Mrs. Kehoe, who warns him about not to upset the mighty forces in the convent, because "they have a finger in every pie" (Keegan 94). Bill's question – "Surely they've only as much power as we give them?" (Keegan 94) – highlights the part witnesses play in the triangle victim-perpetrator- bystander. It is true that the church is so coercive that not even the crows (a pervasive metaphorical presence throughout the book) dare to touch the fruit in its garden; but, as Bill rightfully observes, they are all involved in the abuse, which is fueled by secrecy and passivity. He will be the one who will start chipping away at this power by breaking the silence that made the wrongdoing possible in the first place.

In Leake's paradigm, the term "critical empathy" comes to complete and refine the other two types of empathy I have used the first two to comment on the way Keegan exploits the topic of empathy in her novella. One example of how readers can practice critical empathy in the context of this book is to catch themselves on the tendency to limit the scope of their empathy. While they surely empathize with the obvious victims, they could also try to understand (although not condone with) the attitude of the city dwellers, who all seem to know about the abuse and choose to be silent about it. As Eileen and Mrs. Kehoe bluntly point out, there are things to lose, since the nuns, in

revenge, can interfere with their children's lives. While Bill is brave enough to crack open the thick wall of oppression, by jeopardizing his future, he is not the norm, he is an exception to be admired. As tempted as we may feel to blame the town community, we might as well open up to their view upon the situation and imagine what we would have done if we had been in their shoes, by taking into consideration all the social and personal circumstances at stake. Given that Keegan masterfully, albeit laconically, depicts the pervasiveness of the power of the church and its controlling interventions in all aspects of people's lives, we may become less inclined to believe that for sure we would have been more ethical and more ready to step up to stop the violence. Without access to one's full historical, social and personal context, empathy across time and space can be a biased act, limited by the ideals and the values of our present time. In this respect, Leake points out to an interesting outcome of engaging in critical empathy, namely what we might find out about ourselves in the process:

> Difficult empathy failed to challenge the atrocities of their time, but it also changes how we might view ourselves. It prompts us to ask what injustices we are failing to challenge in our own time, just as people in the past failed to challenge the injustices of their time […] The moral questions that we do not think even worth addressing […], may be most likely to trouble people in the future. (Leake 51)

Conclusion

This article attempted at reading Keegan's most acclaimed piece of writing through a theoretical framework which puts forth conceptual nuances of empathy and highlights the need for a more refined reading of empathic encounters. It showed how the book dwells on various modes of practicing empathy as well on the redemptive quality of a genuine empathic act. As such, Keegan's work, albeit focused on loss, abuse and neglect, manages to show that there is hope out there to cling to. Tiny or big empathic gestures are always at work and this is what makes the world a livable, still manageable place. That being said, it is incumbent upon each of us to critically assess our own relationship with the concept of empathy and to learn the lesson of authenticity and courage from low-key heroes like Bill Furlong.

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