

# The Notions of House and Home in Donal Ryan's the Spinning Heart and the Thing about December

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UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA

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**THE NOTIONS OF HOUSE AND HOME IN DONAL  
RYAN'S *THE SPINNING HEART* AND *THE THING ABOUT  
DECEMBER***

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Literature and Croatian Language and Literature at the University of Rijeka

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## **1. Abstract**

This thesis discusses two contemporary Irish novels: *The Spinning Heart* (2012) and *The Thing About December* (2013). Focusing on the two protagonists of these novels, Johnsey Cunliffe and Bobby Mahon, this thesis examines how the notions of home, house, hospitality and hostility change in the context of the economic boom and crash that Ireland experienced at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Key words:** Donal Ryan, *The Spinning Heart*, *The Thing About December*, Celtic Tiger, recession, ghost estates, house, home, hospitality, hostility

## 2. Introduction

This thesis will cover the notions of house and home, hostility and hospitality, as well as the discrepancy between them in two Donal Ryan novels, *The Spinning Heart* (2012) and *The Thing About December* (2013). Donal Ryan is one of the most important modern Irish authors, and has written about subjects that have had a strong impact on Irish society, such as the boom and the recession. In his novels, we see portrayed phenomena such as the property bubble and the subsequent ghost estates, as well as rural Ireland and the psychology of its people, especially their loneliness and isolation. The author uses different narrative techniques, such as stream of consciousness, first and third person narratives, as well as numerous inner monologues. The novels tell a story of a small village in the county of Tipperary; the village and the people, as we discover, change through the course of the novels. *The Thing About December* presents the reader with a small community in the midst of a property market frenzy, as seen through the eyes of a maladjusted young man, Johnsey Cunliffe. *The Spinning Heart*, on the other hand, depicts how this same community's everyday life is affected by the recession, the sudden appearance of empty properties, a murder and a kidnap. This thesis will elaborate on the impact of the economic crisis on people's idea of home and how the house became the central figure of the economic narrative. The thesis will include general facts about the economic crash in Ireland in the early 2000s, the phenomenon of the Celtic Tiger, the property bubble and ghost estates. Furthermore, it will outline the plots of the two novels and its main characteristics, as well as elaborating on the notions of home and house, hostility and hospitality, including their common origin. It will review the main protagonists of the two novels, Johnsey Cunliffe in *The Thing About December* and Bobby Mahon in *The Spinning Heart*. By exploring their roles in the stories, and their relationships with other characters, the thesis examines the novels' depiction of Irish

society in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The two notions mentioned above, home and house, have a key role in both narratives and are crucial for understanding the alienation of the Irish.

### **3. The Celtic Tiger, the Irish property bubble, ghost estates, and the economic downturn**

The Republic of Ireland was one of the poorest countries in Western Europe in the early 1990s. (Kitchin et al., p. 5). From the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, the Irish economy rapidly developed. (Kitchin et al., p. 6). The term used for this period goes by the name of “Celtic Tiger”.

“Rather than being the result of some well-planned economic master plan, the Celtic Tiger was the outcome of a complex set of unfolding, interconnected, often serendipitous processes, held together by a strategy of seeking to attract and service foreign direct investment.” (Kitchin et al., p. 6). The period of the Celtic Tiger followed the principles of the free-market and neoliberalism, resulting in a shift in the Irish economy, making the country one of the most developed parts of Western Europe. (Kitchin et al., p. 5). These principles were mainly taken from an American model of neoliberalism, which included the privatization of public services, clientelism, almost no regulation, minimal state and developer/speculator-led planning. (Kitchin et al., p. 5-6). This was combined with aspects of a European social welfare state, social partnership and high indirect tax with EU directives. (Kitchin, et al., p. 5-6). The most noticeable “side-effect” of the Celtic Tiger was the Irish property bubble, the price increase of real estate during the period. (Kitchin et al., p. 6). At the same time, the Irish government came up with economic policies that encouraged private developers, who were often connected with politicians, to start building houses which would, hopefully, be sold to the incoming waves of foreign and domestic workforce. To build them, the government produced policies and promoted a lack of a banking regulation that encouraged banks to give loans to developers. House and land prices rose drastically, making Irish land the most expensive in Europe. (Kitchin et al., p. 10). Due to its openness, the Irish economic model was vulnerable to the

international economic crisis of 2008, and Ireland fell into a crisis. (Kitchin et al., p. 6). Given the fact that the property market was the key to the rise of the Irish economy and a source of tax revenue, the crisis deepened and “the vast overexposure of Irish banks to toxic property loans became apparent.” (Kitchin, et al., p. 6-7). In 2008, the Irish economy encountered a severe downturn and most of the continent fell into recession. (Kitchin et al., p. 6). The housing developments therefore dramatically declined, leaving most of the ongoing projects unfinished or abandoned. According to The National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis, ghost estates are defined as “a development of ten or more houses where 50% of the properties are either vacant or under-construction.” The phenomenon of ghost estates has become one of the new Irish “landmarks”; the number of such properties and unemployed construction workers were some of the most telling signs of how hard the recession hit the country. “Ghost estates are intriguing images: they are empty of humans but take up vast tracts of space, sprawl over acres of land but remain largely vacant.” (Slavin, p. 1). Ghost estates are a macabre sight, a reminder of the country’s poor decisions and actions. The abandoned estates were initially planned for social housing services, but such directives did not take effect until only recently, and the problem of ghost estates is slowly being eradicated from the sight and the minds of Irish people. However, rural counties have experienced “out-migration” (Kitchin et al., p. 34) and the recovery from the economic crisis has not been as efficient and fast as it has been in the urban areas of the country. (Kitchin et al., p. 34). The situation poses the question of whether the abandoned estates will be fit for the incoming population in the future. (Kitchin et al., p. 34). There are also problems of people already inhabiting such estates: the economic and social concerns they come across, such as the lack of street lighting and pavement, having only a few neighbors, living in locations with almost no amenities, means of public transport services, as well as “owning houses that are massively in



negative equity” (Kitchin et al., p. 34), might signify a slow recovery from the crisis.  
(Kitchin et al., p. 34).

#### 4. House and home

Ghost estates do not represent a solely economic phenomenon, a sign of the financial and industrial crash; they can also be observed from a psychological and sociological point of view. When faced with images of such properties, one cannot help but feel an eerie, melancholic atmosphere surrounding the abandoned houses. The presence of such properties poses a question about a people's and a country's identity. Ghost estates symbolize the changes Irish society has undergone. Not only did the country lose substantial amounts of money and of its workforce with the economic crash, but an Irish sense of unity, identity, belonging was also lost. These empty, half-finished constructions appear to be nothing more than that – mere buildings, with no one to buy them, inhabit them, take care of them, to make them into a home. Thus, a discrepancy between the notions of house and home can be witnessed with this phenomenon. The term “home” can be seen from various approaches, depending on whether we see it as a place, a house, or we consider it to be more of a feeling, the atmosphere, the people. These notions are represented in the two Donal Ryan's novels that this thesis focuses upon, *The Spinning Heart*(2012)and *The Thing About December*(2013). In these novels, numerous characters present the readers with their perspectives on the life of an Irish village during the economic boom of the Celtic Tiger period (*The Thing About December*) and the post-boom period of recession and the emergence of ghost estates (*The Spinning Heart*). The characters of both novels are depicted mostly through monologues, stream of consciousness and dialogues, while the storylines revolve around two protagonists, Bobby Mahon in *The Spinning Heart* and Johnsey Cunliffe in *The Thing About December*.

## 5. Outline and plot

*The Spinning Heart* and *The Thing About December* are two of the most interesting contemporary Irish novels, and place Donal Ryan in the new pantheon of Irish recession writers. *The Spinning Heart* was published first, even though it was written after *The Thing About December*. With its fragmented narration, divided between twenty-one narrators, *The Spinning Heart* presents an interesting account of rural Ireland in recession. The novel revolves around the main protagonist, Bobby Mahon. All twenty-one narrators tell a story of what seems to be their everyday lives in a small Irish village in county Tipperary, but these are also the tragic confessions of twenty-one people lost in a new, unexpected economic struggle. The prevailing atmosphere in the novel could be described as nostalgic. We come across a story of people who have lost their sense of home and belonging, all due to the fall of the Celtic Tiger and the bursting of property bubble. Ryan skillfully intertwines the stories and the struggles of the numerous characters, making them all a part of a sad collective that might serve as a metaphor for whole of Ireland. *The Thing About December*, on the other hand, portrays a completely different economic situation; the novel is set in the same place, but in a time before *The Spinning Heart*, a time when the Celtic Tiger was at its strongest and the property bubble was just starting to grow bigger. Unlike the fragmented narration in his first novel, Donal Ryan presents the reader with a single perspective, that of Johnsey Cunliffe. We discover the plot through the everyday life of a lost young man, who is characterized as being unable to take care of himself and make his own decisions. The novel is largely infused with a sense of sadness, emphasizing the notion of home and Johnsey's devotion to land, tradition and family. Both novels depict the Irish economy and how it affected the Irish, both during and after the boom. The notions of house and home are present in both novels; the fragmented narration in *The Spinning Heart* shows the loss of a feeling of connectedness and

belonging to the community. Through the pieces of the story, the author depicts the prevailing mindset of the Irish after the downfall of the Irish economy. The motive of ghost estates points to the fact that the economic downturn did not only affect the prices of properties and endanger the unfinished construction projects, but it also emphasizes the loss of the notion of home, since people have suddenly found themselves surrounded by very few neighbors, silence and emptiness, living in what appeared to be ghost towns. In *The Thing About December*, however, Johnsey's perspective presents a whole, an idea of community, despite its negativities. The novel is set in the time of the booming property bubble and economic upturn, but it pinpoints the feeling of loneliness and alienation, which makes the two novels similar in their main ideas of deterioration of family, tradition, values and, ultimately, in the ways they suggest how houses were becoming merely social and economic products, in which every sense of warmth and life was lost.

## **6. Johnsey Cunliffe in *The Thing About December***

The novel *The Thing About December* consists of twelve chapters, each named after a month. At the beginning of each chapter, we come across Johnsey's feelings and thoughts about that part of the year. The novel is written as a third-person narrative, intertwined with Johnsey's inner monologues, and this presentation of his stream of consciousness affords the reader a deep insight into the life of the main protagonist. Johnsey cannot be described in a black-and-white manner. He is a young man living in a rural part of the country; having lost both of his parents, he is forced to live on his own. Here lies the key to understanding his character and the way he accepts and handles his solitude. Johnsey is depicted as a person unable to experience fully any part of his life, starting from his childhood to his adulthood. As an adolescent, he is bullied and alienated. This situation, to an extent, stretches throughout his life. He is portrayed as being dependent, mostly on his parents, and, later in life, on his friends. Through his thought process, it becomes clear how the majority of his decisions and actions depend on other people's opinions. Despite the fact that he is described as an introverted person, unable to take a stand for himself, in the course of the novel he takes one very important step in shaping his future, and that is in regard to his relationship with his home. Johnsey is one of the very few characters in the novel who believes his house to be a true home, not only a mere construction he needs to keep or sell. The episodes in which he discusses his home, with himself or with other people, are turning points in his character. Even if he might seem lost in his own mind, he is steadfast in his devotion and love for the tradition and his family's past.

At the beginning of the novel, we see Johnsey's feelings about the first month of the year, but through his mother's perspective:

“Mother always said January is a lovely month. Everything starts over again in the New Year.” (Ryan, 2013, p. 7).

One of the most important contributions to Johnsey’s feelings and ideas about his house and home is his relationship with memories of his parents. Almost every one of his actions and beliefs are rooted in his mother’s or his father’s beliefs. Mentioning “Mother” and “Daddy” emphasizes the fact that his idea of home is closely related to his family. When his father died, followed by his mother’s death two years later, Johnsey lost everything familiar and close to his heart, he lost his haven. The house that suddenly became his property became nothing more than four empty walls, drained of memories and happiness. Every time Johnsey mentions his late parents, he makes it clear how dependent on them he really is; each time he is faced with a decision, Johnsey recalls his father’s opinions or his mother’s lighthearted jokes. It appears his parents’ everyday life and routines were the only way of living Johnsey found familiar and acceptable. Everything he discusses is followed by expressions, such as, “Mother said...” or “Daddy always used to say...”, making his thought process at times irrelevant and insignificant compared to his parents’. Not being able to function on his own, the main protagonist becomes lost in his past life and shows he was never in touch with the responsibilities imposed upon him as a 24-year-old man.

Apart from his relationship with his family, Johnsey’s deteriorated idea of home becomes visible in his relationship with the Unthanks. The Unthanks are portrayed as an elderly couple who have been by Johnsey’s side since the day he was born. Their unconditional love for him eventually turns sour, primarily after his parents’ death. The key issue in the novel, Johnsey’s dilemma about keeping or selling his house, becomes a stumbling-block in their relationship. The Unthanks become a part of the community, which is only partially on Johnsey’s side, trying to convince him to sell the house to the local investors.

After the “betrayal” of the Unthanks, Johnsey loses his cornerstone. “Himself” and “Herself” were people he considered to be his second parents. However, Johnsey’s reactions to their “betrayal” show his inability to remove himself from his need for a family. Acting like nothing really happened and forgiving them, he showed once again how deep and sincere his connection with tradition and family really is. The supposed betrayal can, once again, not be examined in a black-and-white manner. Although it may seem as if the Unthanks deprived Johnsey of their unconditional support, a closer look into their emotions towards him makes it clear how the elderly couple was only trying to push him forward and convince him to consider all options in order to make his troubled life easier. Johnsey’s understanding of their essentially good intentions indicates his need of a warm surroundings; having lost his family, Johnsey finds comfort in his “second parents”, escaping the modern world of greed he was thrown into against his will, the new kind of society enthralled by money and things that he never wanted, and into which he was never able to fit.

Following the deterioration of his relationships, we see how deeply lonely Johnsey is. It is a painful depiction of a young man who lacks every support and sincere relationship with other people. Given the fact that in the novel Johnsey is shown mostly alone, lost in his contemplations and insecurities, the appearance of two other characters, Siobhan and Mumbly Dave in the second part of the story, comes as a surprise. Johnsey met both of them in hospital after an unlucky incident with a violent group, which left Johnsey blind for a brief time:

“He was in hospital, obviously. He had a clear memory of being knocked down on his arse by Eugene Penrose. There had been a townie lad with Eugene and the boys and Johnsey had a memory of the townie lad descending on him in a whirling cloud of punches and kicks, but it was like he was looking at what happened through the glass of a toilet window. He remembered thinking this fella was going to murder him and he’d be on the news and they’d show the pump with a yellow tape all around it and a little bangharda minding the murder scene and there’d be a bunch of flowers left by the Unthanks and they’d interview random villagers who would say Sure he never harmed anyone, his parents were lovely people, he always

kept himself to himself, isn't it a fright to God that this could happen in our lovely village?" (Ryan, 2013, p. 75)

The episode precipitated a lot of events that fundamentally change Johnsey's life and the lives of people surrounding him. It was also an indicator of how the community perceived Johnsey in the first place. Coming from a good, respectable family, he was seen as a lovely, shy young man, who had never done anyone wrong; however, the incident proved that they also had no true fear or worry about Johnsey's well-being.

Siobhan is a nurse, who became unusually close with her patient, constantly giving him excessive attention and engaging in numerous conversations. Mumbly Dave, on the other hand, is a patient who lay in the bed next to Johnsey's. The first time we encounter the three outside the hospital is with Mumbly Dave's surprise visit to Johnsey's house, followed by Siobhan's visit. The relationship between the three was only an extension of Johnsey's misfortunes. In the beginning of their friendship Johnsey felt, for the first time in a long while, that he belonged somewhere. With the appearance of Siobhan and Mumbly Dave in his life, Johnsey's life became purposeful again. He began to measure his time through their visits and plans, finally emerging from his mind and entering somewhat into the world and society. Mumbly Dave, as his nickname suggests, depicts the very opposite of Johnsey; his constant joking gave Johnsey a feeling of security and entertainment, even though he would often be irritated by the differences between himself and his friend. Starkly different to Johnsey, Mumbly Dave's regular visits and the manner in which he subtly took care of Johnsey's actions and behavior turned Johnsey's house into a place where he began to feel comfortable and welcome. On the other hand, Johnsey's relationship with Siobhan imposed a different change in his life - it introduced love. Johnsey's inability to take care of himself and take control over his life is clearly shown through their relationship. Being unable to express his feelings and take the first



step in the situation, Johnsey recalled an episode from his childhood, when his teacher introduced him to the notion of unrequited love: “His love for her was un-re-quit-ed. Miss had written the word on the blackboard and underlined it twice and Johnsey had not forgotten the spelling nor its meaning. Unrequited. Not returned, not given back.” (Ryan, 2013, p. 110).

However, while Siobhan`s behavior towards Johnsey is not portrayed as unrequited love, his inability, as well as hers, to express fully their emotions and connect with another person stopped them from having the kind of relationship they both seemed to want. Following the story of the friendship between the three, we see the reasons behind such closeness and connection. Towards the end of the novel, it becomes obvious that none of them was living a happy, fulfilled life. All three of them had been rejected by society, one way or another, and they found comfort and joy in between Johnsey`s four lonely walls, which became a little less lonely through their seemingly spontaneous and relaxed gatherings. This is visible in the changed way the main protagonist began to take interest in his house; after the episode in which Siobhan arrived hungry to his house and Johnsey did not have anything to offer to her, he became aware of what his house meant to other people, what society and his community expected him to do with it, and how he could make the place warm and welcoming merely by turning it into a living thing, not a hollow building filled with ghosts and memories of its past tenants. The connection between them burst after a fight between Siobhan and Mumbly Dave, which was followed by Mumbly Dave`s tragic death and Johnsey`s quarrel with Siobhan. Johnsey once again lost companionship and became lonelier than ever before.

Johnsey`s character and his relationships with other can be examined through the notions of hostility and hospitality. While hostility and hospitality are two completely different notions, their etymologies indicate that the two words share a common, food-related root;

the root of the word *hostis* is the Sanskrit *ghas* meaning ‘- to eat-’, ‘-to consume-’, or even ‘-to destroy-’. And even though it is unclear as to who eats and what, a *hostis* is a stranger and a foreigner. Only later did it come to mean the object of hostility, and ‘-an enemy-’. Now *hospēs*, on the other hand, is thought to have originally been a compound, a union of *hostis* and the prefix *pa-* from *pasco*, meaning ‘-to cause to eat-’, ‘-to feed-’, ‘-pasture-’. Hence *hospēs* is ‘-he who entertains a stranger, a host-’. (Minkkinen, p. 53).

Johnsey is depicted as an unusual host; every time he is faced with performing in this role, he seems to get lost and becomes unable to act. The community slowly becomes responsible for his opinions, fears and struggles and remove him from the authoritative position that belongs to him. The vague line between the notions of “hostility” and “hospitality” are therefore presented in Johnsey’s poor ability to take control of his home and be the host who entertains others. His feeling of not belonging to his own home stops him from fulfilling his social responsibilities, and he is instead a stranger, foreigner, his own enemy:

“He had that idea himself. How’s it he’d never thought before of asking Mumbly Dave did he want to stay? Himself and the teacher wan could easily sleep in the big double bed in the spare room. It had hardly been used since the Yanks stayed that time. He’d put fresh sheets on that bed too. He was starting to feel a bit excited. He was having a few people around. He was throwing a party. He was entertaining. He was in his hole. He was doing what he was told.” (Ryan, 2013, p. 192).

This illustrates the awkwardness and confusion Johnsey felt in his role of a host. The notions of hospitality and hostility are intertwined; the fact Johnsey almost accidentally comes up with the idea of entertaining his friends shows how deeply insecure he felt in his position. Planning the act of entertaining made him excited to be finally playing the role expected from him, but it also made him aware how he “was doing what he was told” (Ryan, 2013, p. 192), not what he felt most comfortable doing. Hospitality and hostility are here represented in the fact that Johnsey found comfort and joy in an act he would not

necessarily enjoy or be comfortable with, the act of hospitality, but rather an act he was supposed to enjoy as a society-imposed “perfect host”, which caused the feelings of confusion and discomfort.

Paddy Rourke is someone who takes some level of responsibility for Johnsey. He advises Johnsey that he should not sell his house, but rather keep it. The voice of a man, condemned by his society as a man who had beaten his wife, and eventually the man who shot the local bully, Eugene Penrose, plays a key role in Johnsey’s narrative. The shooting of Eugene Penrose is a very important turning point in the novel; the event came as a surprise wake-up call for the community, and posed numerous questions for Johnsey:

“Did Paddy shoot Eugene for him? Was it because Paddy had thought him too weak to take his own vengeance? Then he’d think of Paddy and all the times he’d patted him on the head with his big huge hand and smiled fondly at him when he was a child and how he used to think Paddy was like a mountain, dark and unmovable and eternal. But it turns out Paddy was like one of them mountains out foreign that are the same for years, and everyone thinks it’s the finest, and they live along the side of it in green pastures as happy as Larry, and then all of a sudden one day the quiet mountain blows its top and explodes into the sky and pukes melted rocks all over itself and destroys anyone who can’t run fast enough to the lowlands and finally the mountain destroys itself.” (Ryan, 2013, p. 162-163).

The event precipitates an escalation of the entire community’s emotions. For Paddy, Johnsey represented all the bullied and oppressed in society; shooting Eugene Penrose was an act that did not solve any of Johnsey’s problems or benefit him in any way. Eugene Penrose and his family were left behind and lost everything in the crash; Eugene ultimately felt enraged by what he deemed as Johnsey’s wealth. Despite the shooting, Paddy Rourke turned out to be the only person in Johnsey’s life who never let him down; he was the real cornerstone, preserving the Cunliffe family’s name and making Johnsey more inclined to staying in his birth home, to preserve it in the name of tradition:

“Now, every little sneaky prick in the country is watching to see what’ll you do about the land. Well, Johnsey, while they’re all fixated on the land, and counting money they haven’t yet got and might never get, you have a right to take down your father’s gun, load both barrels with duck-shot cartridges and bowl down to that pump for yourself and riddle them fuckers that gave you that hiding. Bang, bang... Otherwise you’ll be forever more regretting you left them away scot-free. Regrets like that never leave you, son. Regrets like

that are like cancer, the very same as your father got. They eat you from the inside out.” (Ryan, 2013, p.117-118).

This signifies the importance of society and community in Johnsey’s life. Through the struggle of the main protagonist to keep his family’s property, we are faced with the unscrupulous greed and lying of his neighbors. However, Paddy’s advice above can be seen from various perspectives. The prevailing social and economic climate splintered the society; characters such as Paddy Rourke and Eugene Penrose were left behind in this situation. Paddy’s anger towards the system and the greedy people is apparent when it comes to the advice he gives Johnsey, advice that might not make Johnsey’s life any easier or better, while Eugene Penrose and his family, despite the fact they may appear as negative, are merely people who lost their jobs and security, forced to spend their days doing nothing, deeply insecure and sad.

As a result, a feeling of nostalgia and sadness is omni-present throughout the novel; house and home have become two separate notions. The discrepancy between them is visible not only in Johnsey’s relationship with his neighbors and the greedy community, but also through his memories and his present life; the only place where he can feel what home is like and what it should represent is through his memories of his Mother and Daddy. For Johnsey, family is what makes a house a home. The loneliness culminates in the novel’s ending. Having lost everything and everyone he ever cared about, he realizes he will not be able to handle his life on his own and keep his home. In the end, waving his gun and pointing it to the sky, Johnsey is shot by the guards as he is seen to have become a danger for other people. Thus, Johnsey ends the sad narrative about individuals lost in the modern world, who have lost their sense of self-worth.

## 7. Bobby Mahon in *The Spinning Heart*

Ryan's other novel, *The Spinning Heart*, introduces a different environment to the one in *The Thing About December*. Here we see the outcome of the economic boom: the same community from the previous novel in the middle of recession. The protagonist of the novel, the character around whom every one of the twenty one stories revolves is a construction worker Bobby Mahon. The first voice we hear is, in fact, his. Through the linked techniques of stream of consciousness and inner monologues, we discover the worlds of emotions and the opinions of twenty one people living in a small village in county Tipperary. The novel is actually a sequel to *The Thing About December*, even though it was published first. *The Spinning Heart* continues the story of the same village and its community, only in the years after the economic crash, which imposed a different atmosphere. This is visible in the very beginning of the novel, in Bobby's narrative, when he gives his perspective on Johnsey:

“Once they buried that boy of the Cunliffes years ago and his auld auntie grabbed that land and divided it out among the bigshots, we all thought we were feckin elected. That poor boy knew more than any of us. I remember when they carried him up to the Height, how the Penroses wheeled little one-legged Eugene out on to the street as he passed on his way to lie between his mother and father, and Eugene spat on the hearse and the big dirty gob slid down along the side window. He couldn't stop blackguarding that boy even and he dead. I remember him well. He got kicked around the place and all I ever did was laugh. He was the quietest boy you'd meet, he never threw a shape nor said a cross word, and he ended up getting shot down like a mad dog. And everyone was glad. We all hated him. We all believed the newspapers, over the evidence of our own eyes and ears and a lifetime of knowing what we knew to be true. We wanted to hate him. He hadn't a hope.” (Ryan, 2012, p. 5-6).

This is a connection between the two novels; the way Johnsey was treated in his community and the way Bobby sees him now are fundamentally different. The mistreatment Johnsey received, being hated by people despite their knowledge of his character, is represented in the way Bobby remembers him. Even though he was aware of the injustice, Bobby could not help but judge Johnsey, out of anger, despair and helplessness. He and the community needed someone to blame for their misfortunes.

Bobby Mahon is portrayed as a cornerstone of the community. Yet, he has lost his job, due to his boss, Pokey Burke, suddenly disappearing and depriving his workers of their money. Bobby Mahon is Pokey's most reliable employee and a role model for his colleagues. There is a sense in which he is almost worshipped; people in his community seem to have an unusual respect for him. Being a quiet, hard-working man of principles, he portrays the ideal image of a respectful man who has been torn apart by the new economic climate which has deprived him of his income and the role of his family's protector.

Every narrator tells her/his own story; however, each character introduces Bobby into their narrative. However, the way people perceive him in the beginning of the novel differs from the way they perceive him in the end. They start by idolizing his persona: they sing him praises for being a responsible worker, always willing to help everyone, often taking on others' jobs and responsibilities. His devotion and unconditional love for his wife Triona made him seem like the perfect husband, the cornerstone of his family. In Triona's narrative we find out how Bobby has never been aware of the way others perceived him:

"Bobby was never able to see how he affected people. People always saw what they wanted to see in Bobby. He could never see the way people reacted to him. The adoration of the young lads, the respect of the builders, the misty-eyed devotion of the old codgers who roared themselves raw from the sidelines while he led a team of committed losers to the gates of glory." (Ryan, 2012, p. 145)

However, towards the end of the novel, Bobby becomes somewhat notorious. Following his father's death, Bobby is suspected of being his murderer, even though, later in the novel, we find out that the real murderer is a young man Denis. The apparent psychological profile of the community enthralled by gossip and hear-say stories sheds light on the shattered image of his character. Apart from being a murderer, Bobby is

perceived as an adulterer, following his frequent visits to the house of a single mother, Réaltín.

The economic downturn affected people in a way that may not be as obvious as losing jobs and financial security; the recession had an impact on people's views of their self-worth. Having been betrayed by his employer, Bobby Mahon eventually got betrayed by society; losing his job made him a character people could not look up to anymore.

When it comes to Bobby's attitudes to the notions of house and home, we can identify two levels of feeling. The first one is connected with his employer Pokey Burke, his father Frank and his wife Triona. The other one is linked to the prevailing economic climate and the aftermath of the boom.

The reason behind Bobby Mahon's downfall was primarily his job loss and disappearance of his employer, Pokey Burke. Pokey Burke's voice we do not hear; apart from being physically absent, he also does not have a chance to tell his story, to speak for himself, defend his actions in any way. Pokey Burke is portrayed as a traitor, not only in his relationship with Bobby, but in his relationship with the entire community and his workers. Primarily through Bobby's narrative, we come across the way Pokey was perceived by people in the very beginning: "What reason would I have ever had not to trust Pokey Burke? He was young when I started working for him – three years younger than me – but the whole parish had worked for his auld fella and no one ever had a bad word to say much beyond the usual sniping." (Ryan, 2012, p. 2).

Here we see how Pokey was believed to be an honest man, like his father; no one had any reason not to believe him. However, discovering his story, it becomes clear how he has always felt neglected and deprived of love. The root of such feelings can be traced back to Pokey losing his real name: "I even let Eamonn take his name from him. Pokey, he said,

and pointed a fat little finger at the new baby, and we all laughed and told him he was great, and Seán Pól was lost forever. He never got a look in, the poor little darling boy.” (Ryan, 2012, p. 13).

Having had his name taken away from him, Pokey was faced with the loss of his identity from the beginning of his life. Moreover, his father confesses that he was not his favorite: “I love my first son more than my second son.” (Ryan, 2012, p. 13). His ultimate wrongdoing and escape from his town and his responsibilities can be explained by the deprivation of his needs as a child; his father states that he tried to show him an equal amount of love as he was showing his brother Eamonn, but he has never succeeded in doing this. Just like Pokey lost his connection to family and home, Bobby was forced to experience the same situation through Pokey’s disappearance.

The story of Pokey Burke and his father Josie is easily compared to that of Bobby Mahon’s and his father’s. In the novel, we encounter Frank’s narrative after his death. The relationship between Bobby and Frank presents one of the most important themes in *The Spinning Heart*. We get to discover the tumultuous relationship through both of their perspectives. “My father still lives back the road past the weir in the cottage I was reared in. I go there every day to see is he dead and every day he lets me down. He hasn’t yet missed a day of letting me down. He smiles at me; that terrible smile. He knows I’m coming to check is he dead. He knows I know he knows.” (Ryan, 2012, p. 1).

The loss of Bobby’s connection to his house and his home is felt in the coldness surrounding him whenever he speaks of his father. Being a drunk and losing most of his father’s land, Frank spent his life spiting his late father and his son. The inability to control his words and behavior made Frank detach from his responsibilities of a father and a husband: “I knew I was doing it and I couldn’t stop. God help us, I could never stop at either of them.” (Ryan, 2012, p. 135). Learning about life in a hard way from his own



father, he tried to teach Bobby to be stronger and prepared for what is to come; he did not only fail at this, but managed to pass on the misery to the next generation and create an enormous emptiness in Bobby's heart, until he found his home someplace else, with his wife Triona. If Bobby is the cornerstone of the community, Triona is the cornerstone of their family. She is described as a loyal and loving wife. Through her narrative, we learn more about Bobby than from his own narrative. Triona is the person he equated with home. Being the only one by his side the entire time, and going through his traumas with him, she has always been aware of the emptiness Bobby's childhood left in him: "But it was always all too far down in Bobby for it not to cut and wound on the way out." (Ryan, 2012, p. 141). Helping him in his time of need, being supportive and not judgmental of his professional downturn, Triona is portrayed as one of the few characters in the novel who stayed strong through the misfortunes of the post-boom period.

The context of the novel is the economic crash and it portrays a small community faced with the loss of stability due to the recession. The clearest sign of the new era is the mention of the ghost estates, alongside the closure of the multinational Dell factory and the disappearance of Pokey Burke. The author introduces a character named Réaltín, a single mother, whose reputation gets eventually ruined, alongside Bobby's, due to the rumors of their alleged adultery. Réaltín's character is important because she gives voice to those who have ended up being trapped in ghost estates. The novel reveals the melancholy and sadness surrounding these places: "There are forty-four houses in this estate. I live in number twenty-three. There's an old lady living in number forty. There's no one living in any of the other houses, just the ghosts of people who never existed. I'm stranded, she's abandoned." (Ryan, 2012, p. 34). In her narrative, Réaltín describes the loneliness and eerie atmosphere present in the neighborhood. Here we see what ghost estates represent for people, and that is shown in their name; ghosts of past tenants,

isolation and terror. The previously mentioned rumors about their alleged affair begin with Bobby's regular visits to her house; she was asking him to repair broken things around the house, things she would often break herself, only to make her broken heart less painful and her loneliness more bearable. The ghost estate in the novel opens the discussion of the way the community handles the depression caused by the economic situation. Bobby Mahon signifies a willingness to help, to try and repair the damage, as well as trying to get things moving for others.

The symbol of the spinning heart on Frank's gate signifies Bobby's feelings about hospitality and hostility. This is visible in the fact that he has never felt at home at his father's house; the constant spinning of the metal heart reminded him of his father's existence, his unwillingness to stop casting a shadow over Bobby's existence. This is related to the community's sense of not belonging to their town anymore. The recession left an indelible trace on people's sense of belonging and purpose.

## 8. Conclusion

Donal Ryan has enriched contemporary Irish literature with two intriguing novels which trace the current situation of a society lost in the modern world. The discussed issues of the economic crisis and the way it affected the discrepancy between the notions of house and home are a prevailing problem of modern Irish society. The novels, as a work of fiction, shed light on the economic crash in a different way than an academic or journalistic paper does. A work of fiction can give voices to anyone and anything, like ghosts in *The Spinning Heart*. Therefore, the novels give voices to people who lost them in the middle of the recession and economic troubles. Through the voice of Johnsey in *The Thing About December* and twenty-one different voices in *The Spinning Heart*, we get to hear about the struggles which have one thing in common: the downfall of the property market boom and the subsequent crash that disabled people in a way that they struggled to act or speak out for themselves and their families. By losing their financial security, they slowly began to lose their integrity and a sense of belonging and purpose. The novels skillfully shift between emotional accounts and economic facts, and are therefore an example of the way the recession affected the Irish on a deeper personal, emotional level.

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