

**A Reappraisal of the Short Stories of Mary  
Lavin**

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## Summary

This thesis re-examines selected short stories of Irish writer Mary Lavin, placing a particular focus on fiction she published from the early 1940s to the late 1950s. Drawing on extensive archival research into Lavin's unpublished correspondence, it uncovers how the transatlantic aspects of Lavin's biography intersect with key elements of the social and cultural history of mid-twentieth-century Ireland. It also provides vital new evidence to scholars through its explicit use of correspondence between Lavin's father, Tom Lavin, and his employers, the Bird family. The thesis shows how a mixture of autobiographical experience, social and political context and an empathetic awareness of the significance of various cultural inheritances, inflects Lavin's realist style. Analysing important stories across the main span of her writing, the thesis contends that Lavin is a major figure, with a unique perspective on her times.

Despite valuable early literary studies in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and some increasing attention during the 1990s, we have only recently begun to see a more sustained resurgence of interest in Lavin's fiction. While such a shift is welcome, this thesis argues that a perceived lack of complexity in Lavin's fiction still remains and needs to be challenged in order to reveal the true value of her oeuvre. The thesis offers a new analysis of Lavin's writing that tracks major themes, appraises her use of the novella form, and recognises the richness and significance of her contribution to the Irish literary canon. In taking a fresh look at Lavin's work, it thus prepares readers for a fuller understanding of the intricacies of her art.

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**References to the following locations have been abbreviated:**

Howard Gotlieb Archive, Boston, USA = Gotlieb Archive.

Special Collections, James Joyce Library, University College Dublin, Ireland =  
James Joyce Library

University College Dublin, Ireland = UCD

Massachusetts Historical Society = MHS



## Introduction

This thesis will focus on the short stories of Mary Lavin, an American-born Irish writer whose fiction was well-known to Irish, British and American readers during her lifetime. Particular attention is paid to early career stories published in collections during the 1940s, as these illustrate Lavin's most innovative period, and to key stories from the 1950s. Lavin's substantial body of work actually spans fifty-six years from 1939-1995 consisting of short story collections for adults, two novels, two children's stories, and a small body of poems. A significant number of her short stories were also published in magazines as varied as *Harper's Bazaar* (an American women's magazine), *The New Yorker* (an American publication with a broad remit that included a wide range of literary genres), *Dublin Magazine* (an Irish literary journal), and the American literary magazine, *Atlantic Monthly*, before their inclusion in various collections. Her work was disseminated to a range of readerships throughout her career. Despite her success, however, there are a number of conflicting elements within what appears to be a professional narrative of confidence and achievement. Lavin's work really only received sustained critical attention from the 1960s, some twenty years after her first short story, 'Miss Holland', was published.<sup>1</sup>

This lack of critical attention at the beginning of a career is not unusual; other short story writers and relatively close contemporaries suffered from similar delays, but this did not then exclude them from substantial critical recognition in the future, as it seems to have in Lavin's case. In his biography of Frank O'Connor, for

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Lavin, 'Miss Holland', *Dublin Magazine*, 14 (April-June 1939), pp. 50-62. Cited in Heinz Kosok 'Mary Lavin: A Bibliography', *Irish University Review*, Mary Lavin Special Issue, 9:2 (Autumn 1979), 279-312 (p. 280).

instance, Jim McKeon establishes that some critical material appeared from 1934 onwards, but the first full-length text on this author by Maurice Sheehy was only published in 1969, some thirty-eight years after O'Connor's first collection of short stories, *Guests of the Nation* (1931). Maurice Harmon's 1967 introduction to Sean O'Faolain's work, *Sean O'Faolain: A Critical Introduction*, came some thirty-five years after O'Faolain's first short story collection, *Midsummer Night Madness and Other Stories* (1932). Elizabeth Bowen's first short story collection was *Encounters* (1923): in 1952, twenty-nine years later, a short book on Bowen by Jocelyn Brooke entitled *Elizabeth Bowen* was published and in 1961 this was followed by William Heath's *Elizabeth Bowen: An Introduction to her Novels*. Kate O'Brien's first play was in 1926, her first novel published in 1931, but it was not until a collection of essays in 1981 and later Lorna Reynolds' biography, *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait* (1987) and Adele Dalsimer's *Kate O'Brien: A Critical Study* (1990) that her work was appraised for a modern readership. This was, extraordinarily, fifty-five years after her first work. Eibhear Walshe's most recent work on O'Brien, *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life* (2006), and his earlier collection *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien* (1993), contribute more recent and valuable considerations of her work and life. Full reference details for these publications are contained within the Bibliography.

Although this is a relatively small sample, the pattern illustrates a slower critical response to women as writers; borne out, as I will demonstrate later, within the wider context of other mid-twentieth century Irish and female literary figures. It may appear that Lavin's fiction earns critical engagement far earlier than some others, but the comparisons should be treated with some caution. Lavin was

conscious that she was set apart from her contemporaries, admitting ‘I think perhaps I’m the only writer in Ireland who has supported herself, man or woman, by writing only creative work – by fiction’.<sup>2</sup> Her stringent focus on the genre of the short story may be too narrow for some and may explain in part why Bowen and O’Brien, whose work also includes travel writing, memoirs and reviews, have benefited from an earlier and more sustained revival of interest in their work from the 1990s onwards. Subsequent attention to Lavin’s fictions has been inconsistent and interest in a complete re-appraisal of the fictions, or even critical biographical research, has been slow to develop. However, if the reason for this critical neglect is driven by more than Lavin’s commitment to the short story, is it something more directly related to the subject matter of the narratives?

Up to the point at which a pattern of critical response to Lavin’s fiction became evident in the 1960s, newspaper and magazine reviews were complimentary, and short stories were published in Ireland, England and America. On first glance, therefore, the absence of increased scholarly commitment towards this established writer during this period is remarkable, especially when weighed against her increasing success. In fact, any attempt to correlate critical and popular responses at that time draws attention to neglect of Lavin’s fiction and demonstrates just how insubstantial any attention to her work is: criticism is almost wholly reliant on popular commentary. Is this, perhaps, because of a mistaken belief that the fiction is focused too narrowly on the domestic? Interestingly, this problematic placing of Lavin’s work is still encountered in a more oblique form in contemporary anthologies devoted to the short story. Whether understood in terms of Irish writing,

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<sup>2</sup> Herbert A. Kenny, ‘A Visit with Author Mary Lavin’, *Boston Sunday Globe*, 22 August 1971, A1, press cuttings fol. 1: James Joyce Library.

women's writing or genre, Lavin's short stories continue to elude a full welcome into the literary establishment.

Since the first essay by Roger Chauviré was published in *The Bell*, entitled 'The Art of Mary Lavin: *Tales from Bective Bridge*' (1945), work on Lavin has moved through significant peaks and troughs. Lorna Reynolds, a contemporary of Lavin's at UCD, included supportive comment on her work in 'Thirty Years of Irish Letters' (1951) and later Augustine Martin wrote the seminal critical essay 'A Skeleton Key to the Short Stories of Mary Lavin' (1963), but it was not until the mid 1960s, as I have said, that more concentrated accumulations of criticism emerged with three articles by Robert Caswell entitled 'The Human Heart's Vagaries' (*Kilkenny Magazine*, 1965), 'Mary Lavin: Breaking a Pathway' (*Dublin Magazine*, 1967) and 'Irish Political Reality and Mary Lavin's *Tales from Bective Bridge*' (*Éire Ireland*, 1968). What can be discerned from current analysis of the ensuing criticism is that Lavin's work markedly falls in and out of favour over the coming decades: Zack Bowen's monograph *Mary Lavin* (1975), R. F. Peterson's *Mary Lavin* (1978) and A. A. Kelly's *Mary Lavin: Quiet Rebel* (1980) emerge from a relatively tight timescale. The 1970s resulted in some interest, markedly more than the 1980s, but it is only in the 1990s - towards the end of Lavin's life - that there is a significant upturn of interest.

With that in mind, and following that critical juncture where 2012 marked the centenary of her birth, it is appropriate to re-think our understanding of Lavin's place within the canon of Irish literature. The inventory of Lavin's own publications and awards is impressive yet her absence in twenty-first century reading circles is noticeable. This is at odds with Lavin's proven track record; during her lifetime her

professional success was recognised by her peers, reviewers and critics with a number of successful publishing contracts. She was awarded prestigious fellowships and prizes, notably the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1943 for *Tales from Bective Bridge*. This was an extraordinary achievement for a new writer, and ranked her with other winners such as D. H. Lawrence, Radclyffe Hall, Liam O’Flaherty, Siegfried Sassoon and Kate O’Brien. She also enjoyed the support and encouragement of Lord Dunsany, a well-respected writer of fantasy, science fiction, drama and poetry who wrote the preface to her first collection.<sup>3</sup> Lavin was granted the Guggenheim Award in 1959 and 1960; the Katherine Mansfield Prize (International PEN) 1961 for ‘The Great Wave’; an honorary doctorate from her alma mater, University College Dublin, in 1968 and the Ella Lyman Cabot Award in 1972. Lavin was awarded the Gold Medal of the Éire Society of Boston in 1974, the Gregory Medal in 1975, followed by the American Irish Foundation Literary Award 1979 and the Allied Irish Banks Award for Literature 1981. She was President of Irish PEN for two terms, also President of the Irish Academy of Letters (1971-75), a member of the Cultural Relations Committee 1985 and 1986 and after her appointment to *Áosdana* in 1983, she was accorded their highest honour – *Saol* – in 1992.<sup>4</sup> With such an impressive chronicle of professional recognition, her fall from favour is all the more surprising.

### **The American dimension**

Where it has been noticed and addressed critically, Lavin’s American heritage is seen as a secondary consideration. However, her distinguished career has an important transatlantic aspect. Although Lavin emigrated with her parents to Ireland when she

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<sup>3</sup> Lord Dunsany, ‘Preface’ to *Tales from Bective Bridge* (London: Michael Joseph, 1945).

<sup>4</sup> <<http://aosdana.arts council.ie/Members/Literature/Lavin.aspx>> [accessed 24/1/12].

was ten, as an adult she was determined to retain her American citizenship. Despite some issues surrounding the validity of her claim for an American passport in 1947 (due to residency issues), she later settled the dispute and held both Irish and American passports until she approached her seventies.<sup>5</sup> It was only then she made the final decision to relinquish her constitutional rights, a delayed personal choice which raises some questions in light of the proportional topographical and social focus on Ireland in her narratives.<sup>6</sup> Why wait so long? Was Lavin's decision framed by professional or private considerations?

In fact, this dual American-Irish heritage is a significant underlying and critically neglected influence on her writing. My research makes direct connections between the fictions and family correspondence, which illuminates key relationships and significant periods in Lavin's life. It illustrates how American influences have a particular bearing on a specific body of her short stories and is empirically supported by material content that offers an important new insight for readers of Lavin's short stories. This material offers an essential contribution to the study of Irish literature and enhances our understanding of primary motivations evident in Lavin's writing. As a consequence, through close readings of the short stories, it will become evident just how important this biographical perspective is in terms of the sub-genre constructions of the Big House and emigration narratives, areas greatly underestimated in previous assessments of her work.

The bulk of archive material relating to this American dimension rests in the Howard Gotlieb Archive, Boston, USA and Special Collections in the James Joyce

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<sup>5</sup> Letter to Mary Lavin from the American Consulate in Dublin dated 7 October 1947, ML 628, box 18, fol. 2: Gotlieb Archive.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Lavin papers, fol. 4: James Joyce Library.

Library, University College Dublin, Ireland. The Boston collection evolved as Howard Gotlieb, assistant director and then director of Special Collections, actively corresponded with Mary Lavin to procure a wide range of personal and professional material, and Lavin was financially recompensed for this. However, Lavin also corresponded with other institutions, and from at least one of Gotlieb's letters to Lavin it is possible to see that her intentions were to offer materials to repositories in the Southern states, and to maintain some control about the final destination of archive items.<sup>7</sup> The UCD collection formed through close association between Lavin and Augustine Martin, Professor of Anglo-Irish literature at UCD. The interpretation of the contents of these archives as a means by which Lavin's fictions can be read, builds on the early work of critics Zack Bowen, Richard Peterson and A. A. Kelly. In addition, previously undocumented materials are drawn on to provide a clearer picture of significant early influences on her writing. These new resources move forward our understanding of Lavin's fictions, in particular with reference to links between America and Ireland. Chapter 2, relating to the early part of Lavin's career, Chapter 3 regarding the Big House fictions and Chapter 5, particularly on the subject of Lavin's time at *The New Yorker*, draw on this material.

### **Lavin's Realism**

Lavin's short stories present a compelling case of what Raymond Williams calls 'the substance of a general way of life [which] actively affects the closest personal

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<sup>7</sup> Letter to Lavin dated 23 December 1975, fol. 15: Mary Lavin papers, Special Collections, James Joyce Library University College Dublin. Duplicates of some letters are held at the James Joyce Library and Howard Gotlieb Archive, Boston University. A small collection resides in the Sedgwick papers, Massachusetts Historical Society. Binghamton University, New York holds a collection of letters from Lord Dunsany and Seumas O'Sullivan to Mary Lavin. Manuscripts of a selection of short stories, and some letters, are held at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, USA.

experience'.<sup>8</sup> This research examines the short story collections, paying particular attention to those characteristic modes relevant to realist expression. In Lavin's fictions these focus on the particularity of ordinary, everyday, recognisable events, milieux and people. Lavin's work responds to contemporaneous concerns, reflecting anxieties and uneasiness about shifts in religious and secular dogma. The short stories also fictionalise the impact of legislation and societal developments on individuals. In an interview with Aileen Orpen, Lavin reveals, 'I write from experience, but because of the long period that elapses between an experience and the time I write about it, my stories have become very objective by the time they go to print'.<sup>9</sup> This objectivity is an essential marker of Lavin's literary output and in those short stories that rely heavily on autobiographically engendered plots and characters it preserves the integrity of the fiction present in otherwise personal narratives.

However, this proactive dynamic process by which we assimilate and discriminate between what is read and what is known may render very quickly such social representation as 'out of date'. On the one hand, as Williams notes, this is not inhibiting as '[r]eality is continually established, by common effort, and art is one of the highest forms of this process'.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, the episodic attention to Lavin's oeuvre suggests one deciding factor for the downturn of interest in her work may be whether it is relevant to a twenty-first century readership. Is this a contributory factor towards a waning of interest in Lavin's fiction? Where the stories rely too heavily on temporal connections perceived as out-dated by contemporary readers, it

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<sup>8</sup>Raymond Williams, 'Realism and the Contemporary Novel', *20<sup>th</sup> Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*, ed. by David Lodge (London; New York: Longman, 1991), pp. 581-591 (p. 587).

<sup>9</sup>Aileen Orpen, 'Mary Lavin', *Irish Times*, 6 August 1970, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup>Williams, 'Realism', p. 591.



does take a significant investment on the part of a reader to ‘get’ the reality on offer.

Williams makes the following point:

When we thought we had only to open our eyes to see a common world, we could suppose that realism was a simple recording process, from which any deviation was voluntary. We now know that we can literally create the world we see [...] the old static realism of the passive observer is merely a hardened convention [...] Reality, in our terms, is that which human beings make common, by work or language.<sup>11</sup>

This ‘common’ consensus, according to Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, ‘indicates a formal agreement about the conditions of perception, not an agreement about this or that perceived’.<sup>12</sup> Rather than arguing for relativism, however, Ermarth points out that in that ‘the identities of things and the conditions in which they appear have a consistency and a constancy that permit them to be measured and reproduced’.<sup>13</sup> Taken together with the ‘effort’ that Williams’ recognises has to be present, the reader is both discriminator and adjudicator, determining what is realism and what is not. With that in mind, the close readings of Lavin’s short stories that follow have been selected to illustrate and substantiate the hypothesis that Lavin’s work is essentially realist. This takes into account Lavin’s own comments in interviews. Where that realist profile deviates with the interweaving of the folkloric or supernatural into particular narratives, these will be considered to discern to what extent this may impact upon readings of Lavin’s oeuvre as realist texts.

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<sup>11</sup> Williams, ‘Realism’, p. 590.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel: Time, Space and Narrative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. xix.

<sup>13</sup> Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus*, p. 18.

As Joe Cleary points out, interest in experimental modernist Irish fiction as a reaction to literary romanticism has overshadowed to some extent any serious focus on realism as an aesthetic form.<sup>14</sup> Reading Lavin's work within this mode clearly separates it from the dominant ideological resonances of the Irish Revival and anticipates a shift in emphasis towards more questioning fiction that in Lavin's case demonstrates both empathy with, and critique of, Irish society post-Civil War and Second World War. Cleary's highlighting of a particular period in Irish literary history and labelling of the realist mode as 'conservative' suggests that Lavin's fictions may be too muted or conventional to be of interest. This misconception will be addressed in the following chapters.

### **Research strategies**

The research is based upon close reading of key texts from published short story collections. This is in conjunction with private correspondences from members of the Lavin family that are held in academic archives. The correspondence provides a space in which to read those lived experiences recorded in Tom and Mary Lavin's correspondence and allows for interpretation of a congruent realism through the fictions. In the nature of divided archive sources, there is no way of knowing how many letters were exchanged between Tom Lavin (Mary Lavin's father) and Mr Bird (his employer), or indeed how many letters were exchanged between Mary Lavin, Tom Lavin and the Bird family. Nevertheless, an extensive and methodical appraisal has been undertaken for the first time of those letters that are held, and a reappraisal made of how they are connected to key narratives. They are read as preserving lived relationships, protecting the memories contained within. Close examination of Tom

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<sup>14</sup> Joe Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2007), pp. 111-112.

and Mary Lavin's letters also suggests that they wrote openly to all correspondents, without prejudice, taking the trouble to clarify their meaning and reaffirm allegiances where necessary. Although each wrote specifically for a private intended audience, the fact that Mary Lavin did agree in later life to the letters being held in an institution that intended to offer access to their content suggests awareness of their cultural value. They offer an invaluable discourse on Irish life in the twentieth century. The selection of secondary research reading is to support a sound evaluation and re-appraisal of Lavin's short stories.

It should be noted that my focus on what I consider to be an undervalued Irish woman writer is, however, inflected by my personal history. My own Irish and American lineage informs the choices that are made regarding research interests. As a result I have a personal, cultural and feminist interest in the position of lesser well-known women writers in relation to the literary canon. However, the close textual readings made within this thesis are not wholly or essentially feminist in nature; rather they seek to discern a viable realist mode of expression in the short stories that says something tangible about Irish life in the twentieth century. One responsibility of the researcher is, I believe, to be as open as possible about influences upon decision making processes and outcomes. In *Outsiders Inside: Whiteness, Place and Irish Women*, Bronwen Walter also reveals that her decision to focus her research attention on Irish immigration patterns was made partly to disentangle herself from a personal Welsh narrative and yet at the same time to examine clear parallels between Irish and Welsh population shifts.<sup>15</sup> Breda Gray too recognises the value of assessing personal histories in 'Putting Emotion and Reflexivity to Work in

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<sup>15</sup> Bronwen Walter, *Outsiders Inside: Whiteness, Place and Irish Women* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 31.

Researching Migration'.<sup>16</sup> Gray discusses the research process and argues a biographical relationship to research subject can provide powerful motivational factors with regard to the design of the research and conduct. In Gray's case the experiences of emigration were felt throughout her family when she was a young child. Gray notes 'I was witness to [...] stories and practices of emigration and staying'. Her decision to focus on Irish Migration had its roots there. Their reflections have been of significance to this project.

**Auto/biography: a method of interpreting Lavin's fictions.**

The thesis locates a fluid boundary between autobiographical and fictional forms in Lavin's prose. The resulting synthesis between the two, in Lavin's fiction, contributes to an immersion in the lived texture of twentieth-century Ireland. The reading of that fusion offered here is primarily informed by Angela Bourke's biographical work on Maeve Brennan.<sup>17</sup> Bourke's holistic study of Brennan contextualises her life and writing within a broad cultural landscape. Where the public and private come together, this approach accomplishes a much better understanding of Brennan's writing. I have adopted a similar approach to examine Lavin's own oeuvre. Bourke employs a powerful domestic metaphor to describe the process of biographical research and its negotiated difficulties:

I had not been long engaged in researching Maeve Brennan's history when it became clear that memory and invention lie one upon the other in her writing, as in a pastry that has been many times rolled thin and folded back upon itself. To pick apart the delicate layers will destroy its structure, and yet to

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<sup>16</sup> Breda Gray, 'Putting Emotion and Reflexivity to Work in Researching Migration', *Sociology*, 42:5 (2008), 919-936.

<sup>17</sup> Angela Bourke, *Maeve Brennan: Homesick at the New Yorker* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004).

give a truthful account of her life and times, it will be necessary in places to mark a boundary [...] I have also felt it important to point out the differences between real events and people, and her depiction of them.<sup>18</sup>

Bourke's use of the domestic complements the numerous household analogies Lavin offers about her own writing. Bourke's caution reminds us that when fiction explores a truth it does not mean it is a factual or wholly truthful account. Nevertheless, the representation of location, events and people in fiction can be seen to offer verisimilitude, as understood within accepted literary conventions. In Lavin's writing, this inextricable linkage between memory and invention is a notable feature: the autobiographically engendered fictions such as 'Lemonade' (1961) or 'Tom' (1977) provide accounts faithful to life events, offering genuine insights into collective experiences of the lives of Irish men and women in twentieth-century Ireland. Whether Lavin's stories are driven by these more personal interests or engage with wider community issues, a chief characteristic of her work is recognition of community dynamics and the interconnected relationship between the one and the many.

Recognising the autobiographical genesis of the emigration and Big House fictions is therefore essential to any reading of Lavin's use of those literary sub-genres. Indeed, Claire Lynch's distinction is useful here: '[a]utobiography's principal focus is identity; it is often concerned with existential concepts of self-definition, what it means to be a person, how to live a life and then how to write about it'; this lies at the heart of Lavin's overriding interests.<sup>19</sup> Lavin recognised the

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<sup>18</sup> Bourke, *Maeve Brennan*, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Claire Lynch, *Irish Autobiography: Stories of Self in the Narrative of a Nation* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 3.

impact that her parents' stories had upon her writing, her sense of who she was and where she belonged, as evidenced by her interview with John Quinn.<sup>20</sup> Lavin's fictions create viable environments where individuals manage their relationship with family and wider community as best they can. The personal achievements of her fictional characters are rationalised through various levels: these include social interaction determined by economics, religion and class, and family legacies of the same. Yet these fictions also provide a fulfilment of Lavin's own family narrative in their reiteration on the page. Lynch's coming-of-age sentiment in her introduction to *Irish Autobiography* is set within the context of how Irish writers represent themselves within a varied range of mediums.<sup>21</sup> The process of self-definition is particularly relevant to a discrete number of Lavin's short stories when considered alongside her own deliberations about citizenship and residency over the course of her life. These concerns can also be allied to Liz Stanley's work: Stanley suggests that 'a distinct feminist autobiography is in the process of construction, characterised by its self-conscious and increasingly self-confident traversing of conventional boundaries between different genres of writing'.<sup>22</sup> Whilst Lavin's fiction is not specifically allied to feminist readings, in my view, Stanley's argument that genre need not determine a writer's mode of expression or subject matter, serves Lavin's family fictions well.

Focus on self-identity and the personal is not the only driver according to Mary Evans, who recognises that the popularity of the autobiographical genre also drives the focus outwards to 'the relationship between the individual and the

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<sup>20</sup> John Quinn, ed., 'Mary Lavin', *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl* [1986] London, Methuen, 1987), pp. 81-91.

<sup>21</sup> Lynch, *Irish Autobiography*, p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> Liz Stanley, *The Autobiographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/Biography* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 255.

organising ethic of the twentieth and twenty-first century'.<sup>23</sup> Evans qualifies this in two ways: that 'all auto/biography demonstrates the way in which individuals are perceived and judged both within a culture and by those with more distance from it' and that auto/biography 'can also be about a collective subject'.<sup>24</sup> This type of interconnected social interface between the individual and wider communities is at the heart of Lavin's fictions. Whilst the fictions do not always illustrate social cohesiveness, and more often than not express concerns about isolation, they do offer evidence that the micro-experience informs the macro. For example, personal stories of emigration are shared stories of cultural movement. They co-exist inside and outside of fiction. Lavin's memories of her early years co-exist with those of her parents, and also are transferred onto the wider landscape of Irish emigration. The particular resonances of Lavin's autobiography connect with a much broader narrative of Irish history in her fictions and Lavin's ownership of these co-existent worlds and memories through her writing is worthy of note.

### **The short story**

Lavin's professional resilience and dedication to the art of the short story is significant within a professional niche often perceived by outsiders as second choice for its practitioners. As Heather Ingman argues 'the short stories of major short story writers like Elizabeth Bowen [are] treated as minor or apprentice pieces in comparison with their novels'.<sup>25</sup> In *A History of the Irish Short Story*, Ingman offers a long-awaited and now contemporary review of its development to redress the

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<sup>23</sup> Mary Evans, 'Auto/biography as a Research Method', *Research Methods for English Studies*, ed. by Gabrielle Griffin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 31-46 (p. 36).

<sup>24</sup> Evans, 'Auto/biography', p. 37, p. 38.

<sup>25</sup> Heather Ingman, *A History of the Irish Short Story* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 1.

relative deficiency of critical study of the genre. Kenny's suggestion that we value writers' own comments is particularly pertinent in light of this recent study, as in the mid-twentieth century a number of short story practitioners expressed discomfort about the impact of the genre on their lives. Frank O'Connor saw it as a 'lonely art', arguing that '[t]he saddest thing about the short story is the eagerness with which those who write it best try to escape from it'.<sup>26</sup> Sean O'Faolain whimsically references the form as a 'Will o' the Wisp chased hopefully, and generally in vain by writers, editors and readers'.<sup>27</sup> In contrast, Elizabeth Bowen's seminal scrutiny of the place of the short story in her introduction to *The Faber Book of Modern Stories* offers a more robust viewpoint and encapsulates the coming of age of the genre. Bowen situates the form at the cutting edge of modernity, allying it with the technological progress and novelty of the cinema. She suggests it has enormous development potential unhampered by the strictures of a tradition.<sup>28</sup> Forty-two years after Bowen's introduction, in her afterword to an interview, Mary Lavin says this of the short story: 'It needs only readers to accept that it is already a powerful medium in which anything, anything, *anything* that is to be said can be said, as in poetry'.<sup>29</sup> Lavin's reflections on limitless potential engage with Bowen's confident assertions of its promise, and suggest Lavin's self-assurance as a modern writer. Simultaneously, this allies the short story to the much older literary tradition of poetry, thus securing added gravitas for the new form. Intriguingly, they also offer a small sample of divergent opinion between both genders in relation to the short story and its promise.

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<sup>26</sup> Frank O'Connor, 'The Girl at the Gaol Gate', *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* [1963] (Hoboken, New Jersey: Melville House Publishing, 2004), pp. 195-205 (p. 165).

<sup>27</sup> Sean O'Faolain, *The Short Story* (London: Collins, 1948), p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, ed., *The Faber Book of Modern Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937).

<sup>29</sup> Catherine Murphy, 'Mary Lavin: an interview', *Irish University Review*, Mary Lavin Special Issue, 9:2 (Autumn 1979), 207-224 (p. 223). The Afterword is two pages in length.



In the following chapters, close reading of Lavin's short fictions is informed by what Catherine Belsey calls 'extra-textual knowledge'.<sup>30</sup> Here this includes the contexts within which the texts were produced as well as their reception when first published. Belsey's suggestion that we enter into negotiation with a text that may 'invite' or 'offer' readings has been adopted in analysis of the fictions rather than accepting imposed and intransigent meaning by writer or critic.<sup>31</sup> Examination of the short stories is also made in conjunction with personal and professional materials relating to Lavin and retrieved from archive sources; the resulting assessment of the fictions fully acknowledges the possibility of multiple readings, even though specific interests may be suggested as part of the reappraisal process.<sup>32</sup> Lavin's fictions are ideally placed to question whether Irish society provides sustenance and security for individuals. However, the fictions do not offer idealised versions of community and family relationships. The narratives can be open-ended with anticipated yet unresolved features, and there is a constantly evolving management of Lavin's representation of Ireland at this time. 'The Becker Wives' is a significant example from this period.

The early critical neglect of Lavin's fiction, coupled with a more recent difficulty in accessing the short story collections, suggests that this writer has been overlooked for a number of reasons. Whilst these may, in part, be due to practical considerations as Chapter 1 will show, there is a clear sense that other factors have contributed to a shift from well-known and respected writer to one whose fictions lie on the outskirts of the canon. Is this because inclusion of autobiographical material

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<sup>30</sup> Catherine Belsey, 'Textual Analysis as a Research Method', *Research Methods for English Studies*, ed. by Gabrielle Griffin (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2008), pp. 157-174 (p. 160).

<sup>31</sup> Belsey, 'Textual Analysis', p. 163.

<sup>32</sup> Belsey, 'Textual Analysis', p. 164.

in some way complicates readers' understanding of Lavin's work as fiction? Her focus on domestic milieu and quite ordinary everyday matters may also suggest too limited a range of subject matter. Does this contribute to a decline of interest in her work? In fact these questions highlight particular strengths in Lavin's writing. As the following chapters illustrate, she questions certain patterns of social, religious and political conduct, both on a national scale and more familiar, personal territories.

Chapter 1 introduces a particular strength of Lavin's – her acute visual awareness – that locates her fiction firmly in a recognisable Irish setting. It also provides an assessment of where Lavin's fiction is located outside of her own collections. Chapter 1 also provides some insight into the use of archive materials within this thesis. Chapter 2 contextualises Lavin's early short stories from the 1940s within a realist framework, taking into account those surprising and deliberately contrasting fictions that broaden attention onto the folk tale or fable. Key themes are embedded in the fictions from this period. Lavin returns to these over the course of her career. For example, 'The Mug of Water' and 'Chamois Glove' are later fictions but represent those narratives that fall outside of the realist mode and are clearly bound to earlier tales. Chapter 3 will examine the close connection between Lavin's American and Irish background, and its bearing on Lavin's realisation of a particular type of Big House fiction in her short stories, through 'The Joy Ride', 'Magenta' and 'Scylla and Charybdis'. Lavin's 'shift of gear' between the short story and the novella is highlighted through an extended reading of 'The Becker Wives' (1946) in Chapter 4. This most extraordinary piece of writing is undoubtedly the best of her early work and in many ways is unsurpassed by anything that she later wrote. Augustine Martin first signposted this extended

narrative, stating his ‘conviction that it is one of the finest works of fiction, long or short, to come out of modern Ireland’.<sup>33</sup> The novella works on a number of levels: as a psychological thriller, as family drama and as a cautionary tale; published at a pivotal time in world history just after the Second World War, it registers the uncertainty change engenders in one family. The intricacies of its construction and development is set against an introduction to her other extended stories. Such a departure from her primary choice of the short story suggests a writer who will challenge herself professionally: she has published two novels, written poetry and in the course of her career taught and lectured, in what she describes as ‘my own way’ whilst still maintaining her hold on the short story. Her engagement with public events was informal, with Lavin claiming ‘I have never given a lecture and I don’t think I ever will. I hope to read one of my short stories and then answer questions’.<sup>34</sup> ‘The Becker Wives’ is a densely packed and apposite exemplar of a text that would have benefitted from such a dialogue with its author. Chapter 5 completes the links to Lavin family history through the short stories ‘Tom’ and ‘Lemonade’, with reference to ‘A Bevy of Aunts’.

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<sup>33</sup> Augustine Martin, ‘A Skeleton Key to the Stories of Mary Lavin’, *Studies*, 52 (Winter 1963), 393-406 (p. 394).

<sup>34</sup> Herbert A. Kenny, ‘A Visit with Author Mary Lavin’, *Boston Sunday Globe*, 22 August 1971, A1, press cuttings fol. 1: James Joyce Library.

## Chapter 1

### Locating Lavin's fiction

Lavin's stories have been published in a number of anthologies and this is often the best means to access her work initially. These anthologies range from those purely concerned with Irish fiction, to focus in particular on women's writing or the short story genre. In the early stages of her career, a number of stories submitted by Lavin for competitions or already published in magazines were anthologized. This exposure contributed to recognition of Lavin as a new writer. However, there is a trend in the more recent collections that suggests a renewed interest in her as a woman rather than an Irish writer. Earlier publications appear less concerned with gender distinction. Her first collection, *Tales from Bective Bridge* (1942), established Lavin as a writer of great promise, and almost immediately her short stories began to appear in these types of collected works. Notably 'Fogger Halt' was published in *English Story: Fifth Edition* (1944) where aside from its publishing manifesto, is the phrase 'Only previously unpublished stories by *British* subjects are accepted' - [my emphasis].<sup>1</sup> Its publication date during the Second World War may add some weight to that political focus, yet it is an ironically misplaced agenda as Elizabeth Bowen and Sean O'Faolain are also included. In addition that year, 'The Will' was published in an anthology, *It's a Woman's World: A Collection of Stories from Harper's Bazaar* and in her own collection *The Long Ago and Other Stories*. *The O. Henry Memorial Award Prize Stories of 1945 - 27<sup>th</sup> Collection* took into account stories published between June 1944 and April 1945 and although Lavin's story 'The Sand Castle' was not one of the main prizewinning entries it was

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<sup>1</sup> Woodrow Wyatt, ed., *English Story Fifth Edition* (London: Collins, 1944), frontspiece.

published in recognition of its merit. In his introduction, the editor Herschel Brickell reflects on the fact that fifty percent of the stories were predominantly focused on war, not surprisingly, he felt, ‘since the short story reflects more immediately and more thoroughly what is going on in the world of actuality than any other form of art’.<sup>2</sup> Although not identified as war-themed, in the sense of being allied explicitly to the import of the Second World War, ‘The Sand Castle’ focuses on childish rivalries between three young siblings and their eventual albeit temporary collusion to fight against the turning tide as a destructive force of nature. ‘The Green Grave and the Black Grave’ was published in *Voyage – An Anthology of Selected Stories* (1945) and ‘The Two Friends’ in *Little Reviews Anthology* the following year. In 1946, ‘The Story of the Widow’s Son’, Lavin’s remarkable illustration both of the artifice of storytelling and the tragic consequences of human resistances to our accorded fates, was published in *Irish Harvest: A Collection of Stories, Essays and Poems*.

*Modern Irish Short Stories* (1957), later republished as *Classic Irish Short Stories* (1985), contains two stories: ‘The Will’ and ‘A Wet Day’. This marks the introduction of personal commentary on her stories in the prefaces of short story anthologies. In his introduction, Frank O’Connor claims Lavin as a tenacious artist: ‘Her great gift as a story-teller is her remarkable power of gripping a subject till she has wrung everything from it’.<sup>3</sup> However, this appreciation is tinged with uncertainty as he struggles to justify ‘The Will’ for inclusion, in case it is outside of the realm of experience of some of his readers. It sets the somewhat bewildered and

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<sup>2</sup> Herschell Breckell, ed., *The O. Henry Memorial Award Prize Stories of 1945 - 27<sup>th</sup> Collection* (New York: Doubleday & Co, 1946), p. xiv.

<sup>3</sup> Frank O’Connor, ed., *Classic Irish Short Stories* (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1985), p. xiii.

patronising tone for his later essay ‘The Girl at the Gaol Gate’.<sup>4</sup> The subjective nature of O’Connor’s comments reflects an ambiguous critical standpoint; his unease with Lavin’s personal, intimate portraits of domestic life in particular seems impossibly outdated to a modern reader, but may well reflect an intellectual discourse surrounding gender difference across many social areas between the 1930s and 1960s.<sup>5</sup> There was little in the way of a right to reply for someone like Lavin who preferred not to support herself as a literary critic and did not respond too frequently to requests for interviews. In 1960 a compilation of stories from *The New Yorker* included Lavin’s ‘In a Café’ (published February 1960 in *The New Yorker*) alongside O’Connor’s ‘The Men of the World’, ‘The Wild White Bronco’ by Benedict Kiely and Maeve Brennan’s ‘The Rose Garden’.<sup>6</sup> This put her work on an international footing with fellow Irish writers.

Her short stories continued to appear in anthologies from the 1970s onwards. There is an interesting inclusion in David Marcus’ anthology, *Tears of the Shamrock: An Anthology of Contemporary Short Stories on the Theme of Ireland’s Struggle for Nationhood* (1972); it contains ‘The Patriot Son’, one of two distinctly political narratives that Lavin had published.<sup>7</sup> Marcus does make the distinction that those writers included in the anthology provide ‘nationalist stories but being the work of artists, not propagandists, jingoism never intrudes’.<sup>8</sup> Lavin’s story is one of five that

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<sup>4</sup> Frank O’Connor, ‘The Girl at the Gaol Gate’, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* [1963] (Hoboken, New Jersey: Melville House Publishing, 2004), pp. 195-205.

<sup>5</sup> Caitriona Clear, *Women of the House: Women’s Household Work in Ireland 1926-1961: Discourses, Experiences, Memories* (Dublin; Portland, USA: Irish Academic Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> *Stories from The New Yorker: A Thirty-Fifth Anniversary Volume of Stories that Have Appeared in the Magazine during the Past Decade 1950-1960* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960).

<sup>7</sup> Special Collections, UCD, also holds a manuscript entitled ‘The Flame’, dated February 1974, annotated as destined for a reading on radio RTÉ: James Joyce Library.

<sup>8</sup> David Marcus, ed., *Tears of the Shamrock: An Anthology of Contemporary Short Stories on the Theme of Ireland’s Struggle for Nationhood* (London: Wolfe Publishing, 1972), p. 7.

Marcus selects that show ‘to what extent Fenianism/Republicanism was rooted in all sections of the native Irish people’.<sup>9</sup> These statements map onto and reinforce the particular nature of Lavin’s fictions: they are subtle and most significantly for her, authentic representations of an Ireland that she knew. Marcus places ‘The Patriot Son’ alongside Frank O’Connor’s ‘Guests of the Nation’, one of the most powerful short stories in the political genre. Marcus also selects Lavin’s story ‘Happiness’ for *Irish Short Stories* (1982). This is a well-received story, and appears again in *Modern Irish Short Stories* (1983). In his introduction there, Ben Forkner accords Lavin particular praise:

Mary Lavin deserves to be treated separately, but in the same breadth [*sic*] as the three masters [O’Flaherty, O’Connor and O’Faolain] since she is well on her way to becoming the fourth. She continues to publish a major collection every two years or so, and she has long proved herself to be one of the surest and most original stylists of the subjective narrative.<sup>10</sup>

By this time it was nearly forty-two years since her first publication, and this was not the first link to O’Flaherty, O’Connor and O’Faolain. In his study of Lavin’s work, Richard Peterson also ranked Lavin alongside the triumvirate but distinguishes her writing from theirs (in so far as he sees it), as emerging from a life of security, rarely nationalist in focus and technically outside of the same ‘literary generation’.<sup>11</sup>

Catherine Murphy’s earlier thesis entitled ‘Imaginative Vision and Story Art in Three Irish Writers: Sean O’Faolain, Mary Lavin, Frank O’Connor’ (1967), had already used the short story as an investigative link between these writers, but

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<sup>9</sup> Marcus, *Tears of the Shamrock*, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Ben Forkner, *Modern Irish Short Stories*, [1983] ed. by Ben Forkner (London: Futura, 1989), p. 40.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Peterson, *Mary Lavin* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), p. 144.

suggests they have more in common as a literary cohort, despite their differences in terms of artistic vision and expression.<sup>12</sup> The benchmark of O’Flaherty, O’Connor and O’Faolain, even Joyce, is utilised in these early studies, as critics find it hard to effect comparisons between Lavin and other writers. Sandra Manoogian Pearce in ‘Snow Through the Ages: Echoes of “The Dead” in O’Brien, Lavin, and O’Faolain’ (1999)<sup>13</sup> and Margaret Church in ‘Social Consciousness in the Works of Elizabeth Bowen, Irish Murdoch and Mary Lavin’ (1980)<sup>14</sup> broaden the comparative authorial landscape in later research, as does Janet Egleson Dunleavy in ‘The Subtle Satire of Elizabeth Bowen and Mary Lavin’ (1983).<sup>15</sup> These signal a shift towards establishing other women writers as valued comparators. More recent work by Giovanna Tallone suggests that Lavin’s influence has moved beyond the mid-twentieth century in ‘Elsewhere is a Negative Mirror: The “Sally Gap” Stories of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne’ (2004).<sup>16</sup>

Of the following anthologies, five are edited by women and this reflects renewed interest in her work amongst women scholars. The first is a significant contribution to the field, entitled *Woman’s Part: An Anthology of Short Fiction by and About Irish Women 1890-1960* (1984) and this contains ‘Frail Vessel’. Janet Madden-Simpson argues in her introduction that for too long a hierarchy of

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<sup>12</sup> Catherine A. Murphy, ‘Imaginative Vision and Story Art in Three Irish Writers: Sean O’Faolain, Mary Lavin, Frank O’Connor’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Trinity College, University of Dublin, October 1967): James Joyce Library.

<sup>13</sup> Sandra Manoogian Pearce, ‘Snow Through the Ages: Echoes of “The Dead” in O’Brien, Lavin, and O’Faolain’, *Joyce Through the Ages: A Non-Linear View*, ed. by Michael Gillespie Gainesville FL and Orlando: University Press of Florida, 1999), pp. 165-178.

<sup>14</sup> Margaret Church, ‘Social Consciousness in the Works of Elizabeth Bowen, Irish Murdoch and Mary Lavin’, *College Literature*, 7:2 (Spring 1980), 158-163 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25111327>> [accessed 13/10/2009].

<sup>15</sup> Janet Egleson Dunleavy, ‘The Subtle Satire of Elizabeth Bowen and Mary Lavin’, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, 2 (1983), 69-82.

<sup>16</sup> Giovanna Tallone, ‘Elsewhere is a Negative Mirror: The “Sally Gap” Stories of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne’, *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 10:1-2 (2004), 203-215.



commentary privileging ‘selected, usually male writers’ has given a false impression of the true state of Irish writing.<sup>17</sup> Madden-Simpson is uneasy about a process driven by what she names as a ‘one-sided cultural imprinting’ by an advantaged literary hierarchy. Women writers who are recognised and Lavin is named as one by Madden-Simpson, have been ranked and artificially graded in terms of success.<sup>18</sup> The selection of stories in this anthology attempts to overcome what Madden-Simpson sees as ‘prejudice’ and also includes stories by Dorothy Macardle, Elizabeth Connor and Maura Laverty. Madden-Simpson’s hopeful anticipation of renewed interest in forgotten women writers is borne out by *Territories of the Voice: Contemporary Stories by Irish Women Writers*, edited by Louise De Salvo, Kathleen Walsh D’Arcy and Kathleen Hogan (1990); her title benchmark of 1960 as contemporaneous to a seismic shift in the social history of women is the framing point for this collection.

The next two anthologies look back at earlier contributions to Lavin’s oeuvre: *Stories from the Great Irish Writers* (1987; 1991), edited by John McCarthy, contains ‘A Voice from the Dead’, adapted from *The House in Clewe Street*;<sup>19</sup> *The Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories* (1989; 1992), edited by William Trevor, reissues ‘Sarah’.<sup>20</sup> The first problematically introduces ‘A Voice’ as a monologue, despite its framing as a third-person narrative enclosing dialogue and extended mono-voice. This gives a false impression of Lavin’s methodology, and is problematic in both its partial representation of a much longer novel, and a short story. There is an uneasy

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<sup>17</sup> Janet Madden-Simpson, *Woman’s Part: An Anthology of Short Fiction by and About Irish Women 1890-1960* (Dublin: Arlen House, 1984), p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Madden-Simpson, *Woman’s Part*, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> John McCarthy, ed., *Stories from the Great Irish Writers* [1987] (Cork: Mercier Press, 1991).

<sup>20</sup> William Trevor, ed., *The Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories* [1989] (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1992).

sense of her work being fitted to the short story form without due consideration to her artistic ambitions; additionally, it is an unusual choice in light of the large body of work available. This manipulation is repeated in *The Modern Library: The 200 Best Novels in English Since 1950* (1999), edited by Carmen Callil and Colm Tóibín. Unusually in this ‘top 200’ only 194 novelists were offered and readers were asked to choose the final six. Lavin is included for a short story collection as the best of her writing, *Happiness*, and the example of the title story discussed. The editors here reveal a great deal about their own literary appetites, going against their own remit, and admitting that ‘some of the greatest writers of the period are represented by their short stories – V.S. Pritchett, Alice Munro, Mavis Gallant, Mary Lavin, Raymond Carver’.<sup>21</sup>

The short story ‘In the Middle of the Fields’ was published in *Territories of the Voice: Contemporary Stories by Irish Women Writers* (1990), defined by its editors as ‘the first collection of contemporary short stories by Irish women writers to appear in the United States’.<sup>22</sup> This is a collection which has a broad feminist remit: each chosen story should represent the ‘entire oeuvre of the writer’; the story should say something about women’s lives in Ireland and offer a comprehensive portrait of as many ‘types’ of woman as possible.<sup>23</sup> ‘In the Middle of the Fields’ is one of many widow stories that Lavin wrote, but it hardly represents ‘her entire oeuvre’. Its inclusion under this remit misleads new readers and is, as Elke D’hoker has

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<sup>21</sup> Carmen Callil and Colm Tóibín, eds., *The Modern Library: The 200 Best Novels in English since 1950* (Basingstoke; Oxford: Picador, 1999), p. xv.

<sup>22</sup> Louise De Salvo, Kathleen Walsh D’Arcy, Kathleen Hogan, eds., *Territories of the Voice: Contemporary Stories by Irish Women Writers* (London: Virago Press, 1990), p. xi.

<sup>23</sup> De Salvo, Walsh D’Arcy and Hogan, *Territories*, p. xii.

highlighted elsewhere, potentially self-limiting.<sup>24</sup> This is not to say that Lavin should not have been included but, as her own concerns were that short story writers were ‘to be judged ultimately by the whole body of the work’, the agenda set in this anthology does not allow for a competent assessment of her oeuvre.<sup>25</sup> It does, however, introduce her to a new readership. ‘The Girders’, a little-known gem by Lavin, was published in *Short Stories from the ‘Strand’* (1992).<sup>26</sup> ‘Happiness’ was published in *The Picador Book of Contemporary Irish Fiction* (1993; 1994), edited by Dermot Bolger. The issue of textual and biographical currency is apologetically raised in Bolger’s introduction; he acknowledges the incongruity of including ‘major figures like Mary Lavin, Samuel Beckett, Sean O’Faolain and Francis Stuart, who were born in the early years of the century’ but argues that the collection ‘presents their later work within the context of the younger writers working around them’.<sup>27</sup> He claims ‘Happiness’ as ‘a short story masterpiece’.<sup>28</sup> ‘Lilacs’ is published in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Women’s Short Stories* (1995), edited by Susan Hill,<sup>29</sup> a partner piece to *The Penguin Book of Modern Women’s Short Stories* (1991).<sup>30</sup> It is also included in *Cutting the Night in Two: Short Stories by Irish Women Writers* (2002), edited by Evelyn Conlon and Hans-Christian Oeser.<sup>31</sup> ‘In the Middle of the Fields’ is published in *For the Love of Ireland* (2001), edited by

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<sup>24</sup> Elke D’hoker, ‘Beyond the Stereotypes: Mary Lavin’s Irish Women’, *Irish Studies Review*, 16:4 (November 2008), 415-430.

<sup>25</sup> Mary Lavin speaking to Maurice Harmon, ‘From Conversations with Mary Lavin’, *Irish University Review*, 27:2 (Autumn/Winter 1997), 287-292 (p. 292).

<sup>26</sup> Geraldine Beare, ed., *Short Stories from the ‘Strand’* (London: The Folio Society, 1992).

<sup>27</sup> Dermot Bolger, ed., *The Picador Book of Contemporary Irish Fiction* [1993] (London: Picador, 1994), p. xvi.

<sup>28</sup> Bolger, *Picador*, p. xviii.

<sup>29</sup> Susan Hill, ed., *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Women’s Short Stories* (London: Penguin, 1995).

<sup>30</sup> Susan Hill, ed., *The Penguin Book of Modern Women’s Short Stories* (London: Penguin, 1995).

<sup>31</sup> Evelyn Conlon and Hans-Christian Oeser, eds., *Cutting the Night in Two: Short Stories by Irish Women Writers* (Dublin: New Island, 2002).

Susan Cahill.<sup>32</sup> The most recent anthology to include Lavin's story 'Lilacs' is *The Granta Book of the Irish Short Story* (2010), edited by Anne Enright.<sup>33</sup> *The House in Clewe Street* has been recently re-published by Faber and Faber (2009)<sup>34</sup> as has *Happiness and Other Stories* (2011) by New Island Books<sup>35</sup> and *Tales from Bective Bridge* (2012), also by Faber and Faber.<sup>36</sup>

Though not exhaustive, this overview highlights a fragmentation of Lavin's oeuvre across anthologies. Heinz Kosok's *Bibliography* of Lavin's work (1979)<sup>37</sup> and Ruth Krawschak's *Checklist* (1979)<sup>38</sup> provide more nuanced publication details in terms of essays, articles and reviews, but inclusion of the later anthologies and other publications here will contribute to a fuller understanding of how Lavin's fiction is disseminated. In the early anthologies, the scattering of short stories can be read partly as building the reputation of a new writer keen to establish their name, but as the piecemeal inclusions in anthologies from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s suggest, there is a sense that Lavin is included more for the personal agenda of each editor than for anything else. For example, Madden-Simpson's reclamation of women writers, *Woman's Part*, invites a feminist reading of that anthology, as does *Territories of the Voice* edited by De Salvo, Walsh-D'Arcy and Hogan. This manipulation and dispersal dilutes any thematic or cyclical patterning that Lavin had invested in her own collections earlier, and has some consequences for Lavin's subsequent reputation as a writer. Anthologising fiction out of context is an obstacle

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<sup>32</sup> Susan Cahill, ed., *For the Love of Ireland: A Literary Companion for Readers and Travelers* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001).

<sup>33</sup> Anne Enright, ed., *The Granta Book of the Irish Short Story* (London: Granta, 2010).

<sup>34</sup> Mary Lavin, *The House in Clewe Street* [1945; 1987] (London: Faber and Faber, 2009).

<sup>35</sup> Mary Lavin, *Happiness and Other Stories* [1969] (Dublin: New Island Books, 2011).

<sup>36</sup> Mary Lavin, *Tales from Bective Bridge* [1942; 1945; 1996] (London: Faber and Faber, 2012).

<sup>37</sup> Heinz Kosok, 'Mary Lavin: A Bibliography', *Irish University Review*, Mary Lavin Special Issue, 9:2 (Autumn 1979), 279-312.

<sup>38</sup> Ruth Krawschak, *Mary Lavin: A Checklist* (Berlin: Author, 1979).

for any novelist, playwright, poet or short story writer who wishes to retain a precise sense of the value of their writing in their own lifetime; it contributes to a diminished sense of her work if editorial decisions are made purely on sentiment, as in Callil and Tóibín's decision to include the short story collection and its title story 'Happiness' in a 'top 200' list of novels since 1950, or political agenda, as in David Marcus' *Tears of the Shamrock*. On the other hand, Lavin was one of a handful of women writers to appear in Volumes 2 and 3 of *The Field Day Anthology*, marking the esteem in which she was held by literary scholars.<sup>39</sup> Gerardine Meaney frames Lavin amongst 'canonical women writers of this period such as Somerville and Ross, Elizabeth Bowen, Kate O'Brien', distinguishing them as 'most eminent'.<sup>40</sup> In light of the patchy scholarly attention to Lavin's work, however, later argument for her exclusion from Volume 5 in favour of less well known women writers does not persuade fully. The variable interest in Lavin's fiction, especially to the date of publication of these volumes, sets her apart from Bowen and O'Brien for instance, who ironically were included in Volumes 4 and 5. Renewed interest in Bowen and O'Brien's work outside of *The Field Day Anthology* appears to have favoured their inclusion in both volumes, and the reasoning behind the placing of a writer such as Emily Lawless because of her 'range and power [in] work [that] is largely out of print' is equally applicable to Mary Lavin.<sup>41</sup>

When it arrives, critical interpretation of Lavin's oeuvre is undoubtedly complicated by Lavin's practice of revising her writing at every possible juncture,

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<sup>39</sup> I would argue that Lavin should have had her place in both later volumes, despite the argument that these volumes served as a continuation of rather than a replacement for the earlier Field Day anthologies.

<sup>40</sup> Gerardine Meaney, 'Identity and Opposition: Women's Writing, 1890-1960', *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, Volume 5 (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), pp. 976-980 (p. 976).

<sup>41</sup> Meaney, 'Identity and Opposition', p. 976.

pre- and post-publication. This, alongside an uneven republication record for some fictions, as favoured stories appear in a number of collections and others appear only once, contributes to an as yet inconclusive assessment of Lavin's short stories.

Lavin's practice of continuous revision has created some misunderstanding where newer versions of the stories are cited, and older versions ignored, or not given full attention. Strategic alterations to the text in some cases impact greatly upon meaning outside of its original context.

For instance, Lavin's final collection, *In a Café*, is wholly comprised of revised and older stories published elsewhere. As Elizabeth Walsh Peavoy reveals, these mark latent stories Lavin had been 'reshaping' since the late 1970s; the stories were completed as a labour of love by Walsh Peavoy using her mother's original notations.<sup>42</sup> The collection *In a Café* was published in May 1995, only ten months before Lavin died. It is hard not to sense that these act as a concluding retrospective, a thematic exhibition almost of this writer's body of work so close to her death. Though they span the 1940s-1980s in terms of publishing history, the chosen stories also form a diachronic narrative of Lavin's own life, as seen by her daughter, Elizabeth. In a 2008 essay, Elke D'hoker is uneasy about the potentially self-limiting content of the collection as it 'gives the mistaken impression of Lavin as a highly autobiographical writer'.<sup>43</sup> Yet Lavin is someone who can use intimate and personal experiences to engage with much wider social concerns, and the frequent crossover between the micro-level of the individual and the macro-level of society tells us a great deal about Ireland in the mid-twentieth century. Lavin's use of private experience is not weakness in her writing. It is strength. A reader who engages with

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<sup>42</sup> Mary Lavin, *In a Café*, ed. by Elizabeth Walsh Peavoy (Dublin: Town House, 1995), p. xi.

<sup>43</sup> Elke D'hoker, 'Beyond the Stereotypes', p. 415.

this collection, *In a Café*, as their first introduction to Lavin's work will experience curiosity about the life of the family, the impact of emigration on individuals, the decline of the Big House and the writer's craft in twentieth-century Ireland. The collection must be read, however, with the full knowledge that these stories have been published in various forms before. I read this collection as both an introduction to Lavin's short stories, and as the closing chapter of her career. In the case of the latter, this is informed by knowledge of her writing practice, her close attention to the revision of work, empirical data in archives that goes some way to illustrate the extent of the revisions, and Lavin's own preference that readers should read the whole collection of an author's works, and not just those favoured stories cherry-picked for republication. Despite Walsh Peavoy's suggestion that Lavin had been working on these stories for some time, it is impossible to know just to what extent Lavin had a controlling hand. Keeping an open mind as to just how far these represent a definitive authoritative voice from Lavin at this stage is the most fruitful way to read this collection. 1985 marked the penultimate collections published, *A Family Likeness and Other Stories*<sup>44</sup> and *The Stories of Mary Lavin, Volume 3*, over which Lavin herself had more authorial control.<sup>45</sup>

It is clear that close contemporaries of Lavin's also suffer from a similar marginalisation within the Irish canon in terms of critical appraisal and availability of their fiction to new readers: the work of Dublin-born Maeve Brennan still hovers on the fringes of academic interest and as yet the enormous potential for research on Maura Laverty of Rathangan, County Kildare has not been realised, in spite of the fact that both produced important bodies of work during the 1940s and 1950s.

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<sup>44</sup> Mary Lavin, *A Family Likeness and Other Stories* (London: Constable, 1985).

<sup>45</sup> Mary Lavin, *The Stories of Mary Lavin, Volume 3* (London: Constable, 1985).

Brennan and Lavery were, however, included in Volume 5 of *The Field Day Anthology*. This fractional reclamation is at least something. To date, Lavin is still bound to a similar peripheral interest that has been shown in Brennan and Lavery's work, despite the fondness with which Irish readers of a certain generation remember Lavin from their Intermediate Certificate reading. Readers' nostalgic affection for her short stories itself dates the material, perpetuating a perceived lack of scholarly currency.

Yet there is a further gradation amongst critical recognition of these women: although the body of research surrounding Lavin's work has been greater overall, with RTÉ airing an *Arts Tonight* special on Mary Lavin in November 2012 as part of her centenary celebrations, the most recent biography has been on Maeve Brennan, and some popular interest has been raised in Maura Lavery through the 2011 RTÉ radio documentary.<sup>46</sup> These fine distinctions suggest reclamation of their fictions, and the fictions of other less well-known women writers, is challenged by the issues of precedence and currency amongst the reputations of those same women, even before they are set against other canonical male writers. It illustrates the enormity of the work needed to raise their profiles in a consistent manner. Whilst the primary focus of this research is on Mary Lavin, as scholarly interest in her is episodic, often driven by key literary and personal anniversaries, it seeks to normalise this interest within an extended narrative that recognises other women writers less familiar to readers, whilst offering a route to recover and sustain interest in her work.

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<sup>46</sup>Lavin special broadcast 10pm RTÉ Radio 1 on Monday 26<sup>th</sup> November 2012 <<http://www.rte.ie/radio1/artstonight/>>. Lavery's life and work was highlighted most recently in a radio documentary <<http://www.rte.ie/radio1/doconone/radio-documentary-mauar-lavery-agonny-aunt-cook.html>>. First broadcast on RTÉ Radio 1 on Saturday 18th June 2011 at 2pm.



It is significant that even now this marginalisation of some women writers highlights a problematic hierarchy of interest within academic literary circles. When Ann Owens Weekes talks of ‘the single lens with which critics have traditionally viewed most fiction, Irish included’, the neglect she refers to may well surround adequate recognition of a history of Irish women’s writing within the literary canon, yet it could equally apply to a secondary inner stratum in women’s fiction.<sup>47</sup> How then do we prioritise which women writers are fore-grounded, and when? The thorny problem of addressing why less well-known individuals are being excluded or included at any given time, in any discipline, has to be negotiated against less obvious but nevertheless substantial paradigms of academic interest or popular currency. Despite articulate and heartfelt debates amongst scholars, the problem is still unresolved, even within the broader remit of Irish Studies, as a number of detailed and provocative articles demonstrate. Historian Clóna Murphy, for instance, argues for the most productive means by which a legitimate account of the past can be forged ‘to put women into history’; she calls for greater cooperation between ‘mainstream historians and feminist/women’s historians’ to achieve ‘a valid history’.<sup>48</sup> Murphy’s concerns about distorting the past are most pertinent to Literary Studies.

The challenge to dominant mainstream historical scholarship that Linda Connolly highlights in ‘other’ histories (those of social, economic, cultural, local history and women’s history) also maps onto similar challenges faced by scholars of

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<sup>47</sup> Ann Owens Weekes, *Irish Women Writers: An Uncharted Tradition* (Kentucky, USA: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> Clóna Murphy, ‘Women’s History, Feminist History or Gender History?’, *The Irish Review*, 12:1 (June 1992), 21-26  
 <<http://docserver.ingentaconnect.com/abc.cardiff.ac.uk/deliver/connect/cork/07907850/v12n1/s3.pdf?expires=1365530390&id=73703676&titleid=75002952&accname=Cardiff+University&checksum=F2394C0BA42A64DCF5A9631005A92B50>> [accessed 3 April 2013].

literature reclaiming the work of neglected Irish women writers.<sup>49</sup> Margaret Kelleher draws attention to related concerns about how the focus on women's writing, and women *as* writers, has been slow to progress.<sup>50</sup> Claire Connolly examines a range of contributions to the landscape of Irish critical theory, and pertinently reminds us that '[t]aking Ireland as the main strand of inquiry can lead to silence on other subjects, as if it casts a dark shadow over critical thought'.<sup>51</sup> What these responses suggest is the as yet inconclusive nature of debates surrounding the position of women in Irish Studies, and consequently Irish literature. Assimilating themes of gender and sexuality into a literary tradition constructed primarily through ideas of nationality is a continuing process, as subject-matters outside of the frameworks of national and political history appear to suffer by comparison. Lavin's construction of a narrative of Irish life out of the material of the everyday and the domestic, the seemingly inconsequential, at first glance sets her apart from these dominant interests. However, Lavin's short stories straddle equally grand themes such as emigration and the decline of the Big House. These themes are explored through the substance of Lavin's own American-Irish connections, using domestic plots and details from family history and private life. As a result, the subject-matter of each story contributes to a more complex and meaningful understanding of the national context.

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<sup>49</sup> Linda Connolly, 'The Limits of "Irish Studies": Historicism, Culturalism, Paternalism', *Irish Studies Review*, 12:2 (2004), 139-162 (p. 146) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0967088042000228914>> [accessed 30 November 2012].

<sup>50</sup> Margaret Kelleher, 'The *Field Day* Anthology and Irish Women's Literary Studies', *The Irish Review*, 30:1 (November 2003), 82-94 <<http://docserver.ingentaconnect.com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/deliver/connect/cork/07907850/v30n1/s7.pdf?expires=1365530790&id=73703797&titleid=75002952&accname=Cardiff+University&checksum=79A2508B1FE29DA33CD00F6706A6727F>> [accessed 3 April 2013].

<sup>51</sup> Claire Connolly, 'Theorising Ireland', *Irish Studies Review*, 9:3 (2010), 301-315 (p. 309) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09670880120091991>> [accessed 30 November 2012].

Augustine Martin considered the neglect of Lavin's work was 'wholly an extra-literary concern' but that is a disavowal, rather than concrete reasoning that might offer a plausible answer.<sup>52</sup> What he offers as cursory explanation, that the neglect belongs 'more to the history of publicity than the history of literature', does not satisfy either.<sup>53</sup> Perhaps there is some merit in considering whether Lavin's marginalisation rests on her interest in the lower-middle classes, or 'small-town ethos' as Martin suggests.<sup>54</sup> His concerns make sense with regard to readers in a world 'that is apt to confuse geographical with artistic range', but Lavin transcends the pitfalls of narrow-minded and provincial thinking in her detailed scrutiny. Her outlook is both global and regional.<sup>55</sup> It is not beyond the realms of possibility that, as her family came first during the first twenty-five years of her career, she was dismissed as semi-professional, as someone who wrote for pleasure rather than primarily for paid income, and therefore is easily dismissed in any appraisal of Irish literary history. Eleanor Gay contributes to this perception in her article for the *Dublin Evening Herald* when she writes: '[a] strangely brilliant and independent woman is Mary – who puts being a "Farmer" before "Writer" and being "Mary Walsh" far above Mary Lavin'.<sup>56</sup> Yet, as interviews and personal correspondence have revealed, Lavin's motivation to write was both artistic and financial.

Lavin's interest in the domestic shapes her writing. The micro-domestic, familial milieu that she explores in stories such as 'At Sallygap' and 'A Happy Death' constructs a universality that is at once familiar to readers yet fraught with

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<sup>52</sup> Augustine Martin, 'A Skeleton Key to the Stories of Mary Lavin', *Studies*, 52 (Winter 1963), 393-406 (p. 393).

<sup>53</sup> Martin, 'A Skeleton Key', p. 393.

<sup>54</sup> Martin, 'A Skeleton Key', p. 405.

<sup>55</sup> Martin, 'A Skeleton Key', p. 405.

<sup>56</sup> Eleanor Gay, 'Eleanor Gay Recalls the Good Old Days of Not So Long Ago', *Evening Herald*, 14 August 1957, press cuttings, fol. 1: James Joyce Library.

personal tensions that resonate far beyond the walls of individual homes. That butterfly effect in the narratives deceptively projects back on itself, as life inside the home mirrors social dramas outside. Lavin was a widowed single parent for a significant part of her writing career. Constantly worried about money problems, anxious that her children should not suffer as a result of their family circumstances, these concerns were the bedrock for those narratives that deal with home life. Lavin's representation of what she sees deals with the fundamental structures of society: for example, Lavin challenges popular notions of the idealised functional family unit, revealing complex intricate truths about individuals and, in the process, their relationship to the wider community.

Long before Lavin chose the short story as a practical means of support in light of those responsibilities, she had begun writing for pleasure: first as a postgraduate student while still working towards a PhD on Virginia Woolf and then, having made the decision to withdraw from academic work, quickly forged a reputation as a promising new writer. She was published in *Atlantic Monthly* and *Dublin Magazine* before her first collection was published in 1942, and later had stories published in *The New Yorker* from 1958-1976. Correspondence with Ellery Sedgwick and Edward Weeks (editors of *Atlantic Monthly*), and Gordon Lish (*Esquire*) reveals a great deal about Lavin's efforts to establish links with various publications.<sup>57</sup> Although these contacts illustrate Lavin's determination to extend her writing output and publishing range, focus throughout the thesis will be on stories contained in her published collections. Reference to other publications will be made to support or illustrate particular instances only.

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<sup>57</sup> ML 628, box 25, fol. 2: Gotlieb Archive.

Elke D’hoker has suggested that, on a practical level, the lack of availability of Lavin’s published work has hampered sustained interest.<sup>58</sup> Sixteen years before D’hoker’s essay, in her letter to Lavin, Janet Egleson Dunleavy had expressed concern that Lavin’s fictions were not more readily available in paperback.<sup>59</sup> Egleson Dunleavy highlighted the increasing popularity of American college courses on the short story, and cogently argued that as students could not afford hardback copies for their academic pathways, fiction in paperback was more likely to be placed on syllabi and purchased by students. Economic pragmatism was the driver for publishing survival. D’hoker also suggests that as the fictions are not easily defined, this too inhibits a revival of her work.<sup>60</sup> Both of her observations are true. Lavin’s frame of reference is broad: she offers us broken individuals, destabilised families, politics, a critique of the nation, the art of writing, the Church – a panorama of life. Her clear vision and insight emerge from a complex sense of unprejudiced scrutiny and empathetic understanding for the people that she writes about, whatever their flaws. The visual metaphor of the ‘single lens’ that Owens Weekes uses in her introduction to *Irish Women Writers* can be positively appropriated if one considers Lavin as the operator of a camera obscura having both viewed and translated images of real life.<sup>61</sup> Where the technology converts inverted images Lavin makes sense of the Ireland that she sees, an Ireland complicated by issues of social import such as politics and religion, poverty, family and fear of change. Whatever context Lavin situates her characters in the actions of an individual are acutely observed as part of a far greater social pattern. There is at the same time a clear sense of the universality

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<sup>58</sup> D’hoker, ‘Beyond the Stereotypes’, p. 415.

<sup>59</sup> Letter dated 17 September 1982, fol. 11: James Joyce Library.

<sup>60</sup> D’hoker, ‘Beyond the Stereotypes’, p. 415.

<sup>61</sup> Owens Weekes, *Irish Women Writers*, p. 3.

of the human condition, as Egleson Dunleavy notes, moving Lavin's narratives beyond the categories of parochial and insular writing.<sup>62</sup> Lavin's drive is for authenticity, an ideology with its own history and politics. She had already made that clear during an interview in the early 1980s:

‘My interest is in recording and preserving the real life of living Irishmen and women whom I have known and seen with my own eyes. I want to note the way they acted and the things they believed, whether right or wrong. I'd like to preserve them, rather than the diluted culture that is being shown by tourist bodies and agencies – all good and no bad’.<sup>63</sup>

Her reaction against ‘tourist bodies’ and drive for authenticity has to be understood in terms of early- to mid-twentieth-century travel impressions such as Stephen Gwynn's *The Charm of Ireland* (1927), H. V. Morton's *In Search of Ireland* (1930), Lynn Doyle's *The Spirit of Ireland* (1935) and Sean O'Faolain's *An Irish Journey* (1941); these served as guides and travelogues that both romanticised and politicised Ireland for tourists.<sup>64</sup> In many ways they also supported the Irish Tourist Association's advertising programme for tourism. This type of literature is what Lavin reacts against. Lavin is not being narrow-minded; she was an experienced traveller conscious of the broad frames of reference available to her through literature and art. Lavin took occasional trips to America with her father when she

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<sup>62</sup> Janet Egleson Dunleavy, ‘The Fiction of Mary Lavin: Universal Sensibility in a Particular Milieu’, *Irish University Review*, The National Library of Ireland Centenary Issue 1877-1977, 7:2 (Autumn 1977), 222-236 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25477178>> [accessed 3 February 2010].

<sup>63</sup> L. Robert Stevens and Sylvia Stevens, ‘An Interview with Mary Lavin’, *Studies*, 86: 341 (1997), 43-50 (p. 46).

<sup>64</sup> Eric Zuelow, *Making Ireland Irish: Tourism and National Identity since the Irish Civil War* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2009). Stephen Gwynn, *The Charm of Ireland: Her Places of Beauty, Entertainment, Sport and Historic Association* [1927] [revised 1934] (London; Bombay; Sydney: G. Harrap & Co Ltd, 1936); H. V. Morton, *In Search of Ireland* [1930] (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1936); Lynn Doyle, *The Spirit of Ireland* [1935] (London: Batsford Ltd, 1939); Sean O'Faolain, *An Irish Journey* (London: Readers Union, 1941).

was a student at UCD. She spent time in America as writer-in-residence at the University of Connecticut in the late 1960s and earlier had travelled with her daughters through Europe, following a Guggenheim grant in 1959 and 1960. She was a French speaker who studied English and French literature at UCD and who, for a short time, taught French at the Loreto College, Dublin.<sup>65</sup> Her response to marketing strategies by tourism bodies was not, therefore, prejudiced by inexperience. Lavin was not opposed to the notion of new experiences and engaging with other cultures as her travels clearly illustrate.

### **Texts and reception**

Although readers will have their favourites, and while critics tend to utilise stories for their own ends with thematic or chronological paradigms of interest, Mary Lavin cautioned that '[a] short story writer has to be judged ultimately by the whole body of the work. The most anthologised stories are often the least important in the body of the work'.<sup>66</sup> There are challenges marked by this statement: Lavin's own collections are often difficult to find as they are out of print, and so only individual stories are found in anthologies. Those that are released tend to form a customary pattern: 'Lilacs' and 'Happiness', for instance, are popular choices.<sup>67</sup> This limitation diminishes the impact of Lavin's corpus of work, and complicates our sense of Lavin's position in the Irish Literary tradition. Kelleher's prompt to be open to the value of questioning how and why we retrieve women's writing, and why that writing is lost in the first place, is a valuable reminder of the sensitivities surrounding

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<sup>65</sup> Leah Levenson, *The Four Seasons of Mary Lavin* (Dublin: Marino, 1998), pp. 46-47, p. 165.

<sup>66</sup> Harmon, 'From Conversations with Mary Lavin', p. 292.

<sup>67</sup> See D'hoker, 'Beyond the Stereotypes', p. 415-6 for comments on the marginalisation of certain writers.

the recovery of forgotten fictions.<sup>68</sup> Yet to reclaim or retrieve even a small quantity of writings is a necessary task, even if it temporarily unbalances that picture.

The body of work with which this thesis engages is a substantial one that emerged over several decades and is published on both sides of the Atlantic. Some of Lavin's short stories are republished at least three times, but twenty, including 'Magenta' (1946), 'Scylla and Charybdis' (1956) and 'Villa Violetta' (1972) appear only once. These single appearances occur in each decade of Lavin's publishing career so no one timeframe can be claimed either as retrospective or original work only. Where Lavin also wrote a number of stories for publications such as *The New Yorker*, the *Atlantic Monthly* or *The Dublin Magazine*, not all were republished in the collections.<sup>69</sup> The practical need for financial security in part accounts for the range of publications that Lavin wrote for in her lifetime, but this diversity was not unusual for Irish writers in the mid-twentieth century: Frank O'Connor, Maeve Brennan and Brian Friel also wrote for *The New Yorker*. Lavin's first short story, 'Miss Holland', was accepted for *The Dublin Magazine* in 1938, published in 1939.<sup>70</sup> 'The Green Grave and the Black Grave' (1940) and 'At Sallygap' (1941) were both published by *Atlantic Monthly* in those years. This appeal to both American and Irish markets is a feature of her work: notably, it reinforces her dual heritage as an American-born Irish woman in the choice of publication whilst providing a valuable source of income.

Throughout her career Lavin continually revised both her ongoing and published work; most new collections held revisited and modified content as well as

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<sup>68</sup> Margaret Kelleher, 'Writing Irish Women's Literary History', *Irish Studies Review*, 9:1 (July 2010), 5-14 (p. 9) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09670880020032654>> [accessed 2 April 2013].

<sup>69</sup> See Kosok, 'Mary Lavin: A Bibliography', 279-312.

<sup>70</sup> Richard Burnham, 'Mary Lavin's Short Stories in *The Dublin Magazine*', *Cahiers du Centre d'Etudes Irlandaises* (Rennes, France), 2 (1977), 103-110 (p. 103).



introducing new material. Where repositories and archive collections now hold copies of her personal manuscripts, these are covered in extensive marginalia and revisions, as are her personal copies of the proofs and published collections. This meticulous redrafting can be interpreted as restlessness with the final product and an inability to accept any story as complete. However, Lavin responded to criticism surrounding the rewriting of published material with some confidence rather than apology. In an interview, Lavin recalls Sean O’Faolain’s conviction that ‘an author has no right to re-edit his published stories, that the work should stand as it was written’.<sup>71</sup> Lavin’s own emphatic declarative in response, ‘I do not hold this view’, stems from two personal beliefs she affirmed: that it is right and proper to make corrections and that experience, in her case at that time over forty years, enhances the revised stories whilst improving her own learning of the craft.

In an earlier interview, in more colloquial terms, she said: ‘[e]very time a story of mine is about to appear in a second edition, or an anthology, I feel obliged to have another bash at it’.<sup>72</sup> This sense of responsibility can be read as obsession. Yet Egleston Dunleavy likened it to a mother unable to let a young child go to school without making one more adjustment to their clothing or their appearance, and that simile translates aptly to Lavin’s pride in her work, and love of the craft.<sup>73</sup> Lavin’s personal correspondence is also littered with corrections and letter margins surrounding the body of text filled with additional messages. The substance of these letters offers valuable insight into her creative motivation and insecurities, whilst the

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<sup>71</sup> Stevens and Stevens, ‘An Interview with Mary Lavin’, p. 43. Original interview was held in 1981.

<sup>72</sup> Catherine Murphy, ‘Mary Lavin: an interview’, *Irish University Review*, Mary Lavin Special Issue 9:2 (Autumn 1979), 207-224, (p. 219).

<sup>73</sup> Letter dated 17 September 1982, fol. 11: James Joyce Library.

ever-broadening text inscription from the original body of the correspondence creates an additional visual archive contribution.

Newspaper and magazine reviews of her work were almost entirely positive; the continued quest for improvement was self-motivated rather than as a result of unfavourable critiques. The stories were sometimes altered by only one or two words following republication.<sup>74</sup> Her rationale is not always apparent, although in a story such as ‘Sarah’ as time passed Lavin’s treatment of the main protagonist became more severe, suggesting a more personal critical response to the scenarios she had constructed somewhat at odds with a more liberated modern consciousness. These tensions will be highlighted in Chapter 2.

### **Lavin’s Archive**

Use of archival material forms an essential pathway to readings of Lavin’s fictions, as there are fruitful, close links between Lavin’s own family history and key texts. For example, the hitherto unexplored contents of letters from Tom Lavin to his employers, the Bird family of East Walpole, Massachusetts offer a primary data source. Close reading and analysis of these letters has revealed to what extent that relationship impacted upon Mary Lavin’s own work, in terms of contextualising autobiographical environments and authenticating experiences that were translated to fiction. Correspondence between Mary Lavin and Howard Gotlieb in particular illustrates a growing interest in establishing a key locus of creative, financial and personal information that would be accessed in the future by interested parties.

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<sup>74</sup> The James Joyce Library Special Collections, UCD and Navan Library, County Meath both hold Lavin’s personal copies of published collections annotated by her.

Gotlieb made it clear to Lavin that as much material as possible should be stored in Boston Special Collections. He wrote:

The photographs, the press cuttings, the “personal” correspondence, and the other “letters” do interest me a lot. After all, I do feel that what we have created here is the official Mary Lavin collection ... the one in which scholars will do their primary studies of you, your life, your work. My object these past years has been to make it as complete as possible and I continue in this direction.<sup>75</sup>

Poignantly, the muddled, haphazard and various contents of such a key archive, suggests some urgency on the part of Mary Lavin and the repository manager to accommodate and archive an accumulation of material whilst she was still alive, whether the motivations were financial on Lavin’s part as she was recompensed for the materials, or legal on Gotlieb’s, with regard to future family concerns.

The archive materials reveal Lavin’s productivity outside of the published fiction, and are remarkable in light of how she believed her time was allocated. In an interview with Bonnie Kime Scott, Lavin described herself as ‘a one-armed writer [...] I am interrupted fifty times an hour. I am disorganised, all held together with safety pins’.<sup>76</sup> Lavin notes elsewhere that she managed her revisions ‘in time filched from other duties’.<sup>77</sup> This might suggest an unconvincing mastery of her writing. Yet this is not the case. The obsessive nature of her return to the fictions despite demands on her time is therefore particularly worthy of note. With this in mind,

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<sup>75</sup> Letter to Lavin dated 23 December 1975, fol. 15: James Joyce Library.

<sup>76</sup> Bonnie Kime Scott, ‘Mary Lavin and the Life of the Mind’, *Irish University Review*, 9:2 (Autumn 1979), 262-278, (p. 265).

<sup>77</sup> Aileen Orpen, ‘Mary Lavin’, *Irish Times*, 6 August 1970, p. 12.

extensive marginalia in Lavin's personal copies of published collections and as supplement to private correspondence can therefore be read as augmentation to what Lavin revealed was a 'life of the mind'.<sup>78</sup> This offers some additional insight into Lavin's creative processes. These extraneous markings work alongside more formal revisions to blur the boundaries between marginalia and revision. By revising, commenting and writing in copies of her own published collections, and by reworking personal correspondence around the edges of the paper and main text, Lavin adopts the dual role of writer and distant reader.

In her introduction to *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books*, Heather Jackson suggests that 'authorial reflections and revisions are marginalia of a special kind, refinements to the text, and of limited interest, as a rule, to anyone but the producer'.<sup>79</sup> However, Lavin's conscious decision to donate and sell a substantial part of her professional and personal documents to institutions, despite warnings to delay from at least one business acquaintance, acknowledges her understanding of a future possibility where those revisions are being viewed by others who choose to enter archival space, and makes relevant their place in a study such as this. Substantial pressure must have been put on her to consider various institutions as repositories. It is worth noting A. D. Peters' advisory comments from 1962 here:

This business of buying original manuscripts for American University libraries has snowballed tremendously and a number of our authors get this

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<sup>78</sup> Scott, 'Mary Lavin', p. 265.

<sup>79</sup> H. J. Jackson, *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* (New Haven; London Yale University Press, 2001), p. 13.

sort of offer ... I suggest that you hold him off [Schwartz] until I have completed my enquiries and can write to you again.<sup>80</sup>

This culturally driven accumulation of materials is significant. It concentrates valued documents in institutions supported by financially loaded budgets and in many ways that protects the integrity of a body of material. However, it also limits the availability of those same materials to other researchers because of financial constraints. Lavin continued the long established relationship with Howard Gotlieb in selling manuscripts and personal effects.

Lavin's notations echo certain freedoms intimated by Edgar Allan Poe in 'Marginalia'. Having admitted to the practicality of 'an ample margin' Poe adds:

[T]he *marginalia* are deliberately pencilled, because the mind of the reader wishes to unburthen itself of a *thought*; — however flippant — however silly — however trivial — still a thought indeed, not merely a thing that might have been a thought in time, and under more favorable circumstances. In the *marginalia*, too, we talk only to ourselves; we therefore talk freshly — boldly — originally — with *abandonnement* — without conceit —.<sup>81</sup>

Examination of Lavin's writing practice reveals a great deal in common with Poe's observation and draws attention to another blurring of boundary in Lavin's case — where early stage creativity and later revision work both emerge from similar mindsets. The green notebooks Lavin used to record new ideas are full of large

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<sup>80</sup> Letter dated 27 November 1962 to Lavin from A. D. Peters, NY (Michael Sissons), ML 628, box 12: Gotlieb Archive.

<sup>81</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, 'Marginalia', Part 1, *Democratic Review*, November 1844, 15: 484-494 <<http://www.eapoe.org/works/misc/mar1144.htm>> [second access 17 May 2013].

scrawled writing, not her more usual tightly formed script in revisions and comments that occur on printed collections or correspondence.

In the early creative phase Lavin writes in Poe's sense of 'freshly — boldly — originally — with *abandonnement* — without conceit' associated with marginalia, and the penmanship is a visual marker of this. Refinements to the stories come much later and the physical traces on the page differ greatly. She had qualified this process saying that a story came to her 'complete yet compressed all at once, needing to be drawn out'.<sup>82</sup> Examination of Lavin's manuscripts reveals that as she draws out each story, some subsequent readings engender instinctive changes more akin to marginalia responses, as the experience of approaching her own work at a later date mimics the primary encounter of a new reader.<sup>83</sup> In many ways Lavin's insistence on returning to stories over and over again places her alongside Frank O'Connor and against Sean O'Faolain in the debates surrounding revising one's own work.

Interpreting the unexpected scraps of information, notation and grammatical emphases around published material is an especially demanding and personal exercise, as Carolyn Steedman highlights in *Dust*.<sup>84</sup> Steedman moves beyond the mere accumulation of materials as she discusses navigating record offices and repositories, and lyrically sheds light on the occupational hazards of working within the physical history of pathological detritus that researchers inhabit, such as the dust of the vellum and paper, the air of the past. Whilst this is more a hazard for scholars working amongst older materials than the mid-twentieth century, and Steedman is

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<sup>82</sup> Murphy, 'Mary Lavin: An Interview', p. 212.

<sup>83</sup> A. A. Kelly suggests 'editing her own work which, written years before, is almost like editing the work of another'. See A. A. Kelly, *Mary Lavin Quiet Rebel: A Study of her Short Stories* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1980), p. 144.

<sup>84</sup> Carolyn Steedman, *Dust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).

being playful in her approach to the subject, there is a real sense of breathing in the air of Lavin's life whilst finding a way through the archive materials. For example, the Lavin archive at the Gotlieb contains, amongst many other personal items, Lavin's wedding bouquet. The object might be read as a physical reminder of the tenuous nature of public recognition and private histories. In an envelope and shockingly deteriorated, it is not preserved in the sense of a floral tribute or an artefact for public viewing – it is literally *turning to dust*. The inevitable physical inhalation of presence becomes meaningfully allied to Lavin's correspondence and manuscripts as it is stored amongst them. In many ways Steedman's pejorative association is transcended: Lavin's second marriage, for instance, is documented as a resolution to a long-term relationship and a contributory factor to the later work she produces. It is, therefore, significant that this personal marker of a relationship is kept. Acknowledging the significance of personal material in archives, additional to, and well beyond, simple drafts of the short stories, broadens rather than limits, our appreciation of Lavin's fiction. Recognising the widest possible influence on a writer's life and the substance of creativity empowers readers to be viable textual destinations, whose comprehension of material is made from an informed choice. Contra Roland Barthes, there is no tyranny, only empowerment.<sup>85</sup>

The collation and interpretation of revisions and marginalia often involves a literal 'reading between the lines' where handwritten text overlaps, underscores, obscures and therefore alters the printed text as well as its content. For instance, a simple notation such as: 'Speeded up for reading Poetry Centre Nov 19. 1967 New York' at the top of the title page for 'In the Middle of the Fields' indicates why some

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<sup>85</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image Music Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 142-148.

minor alterations might have been made to a published short story.<sup>86</sup> In itself, it is easy to read. Lavin's handwritten note to herself at the top of a newspaper article elsewhere is also revealing, as it suggests the genesis of 'The Yellow Beret' in a report of two murders that took place in 1959; dated 25 January 1971 it reads: 'This headline gave me the idea for The Yellow Beret'.<sup>87</sup> The publication date is partially obscured by a handwritten acronym TLS. A recent paper by Julie Anne Stevens traces 'The Yellow Beret' to an additional source based on the events of the murder of a Catherine Cooper, and so isolated incidences of annotation like this are important, contributing to a sense of Lavin's own methodology, but not conclusively.<sup>88</sup>

Archive materials used throughout the thesis are fractional constituents of Lavin's existing private and public papers held within academic institutions. These fall outside of the existence of those papers still held by family members and friends, and those documents long since vanished into landfill sites or fireplaces. The history of Lavin's papers at the Boston archive (as extrapolated from the content itself) is that material arrived gradually depending on how forthright Gotlieb was about pursuing Lavin's personal papers and how much Lavin felt that she needed some financial support. Although it is of a significant size and contains valuable material, the archive is not the only repository of Lavin's life work, as noted earlier. However, it does contain a most important collection of correspondence that forms the basis for a significant element of this research.

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<sup>86</sup> Mary Lavin, 'In the Middle of the Fields', *Kilkenny Magazine*, 12-13 (Spring 1965), p. 90: private archive collection, Meath County Library, Navan, Co. Meath.

<sup>87</sup> Mary Lavin, newspaper article unattributed, Monday 20 July 1959, ML 628, box 18, fol. 2: Gotlieb Archive.

<sup>88</sup> Julie Anne Stevens, 'Murder and Mystery: The Case of the Yellow Beret'; paper given at the International Conference of the Irish Short Story, University of Leuven, Belgium, 2012.



### Previously unseen manuscripts

One final significant aspect of scrutinizing archive material is that as marginalia comes in many and varied forms, it can also reveal hitherto unread drafts of short stories especially if, as Poe suggests, paper notes are held within the leaves of a text. Lavin was a recycler: anecdotal reference to turning her thesis on Virginia Woolf over and writing her first published short story on the back ('Miss Holland' for *Dublin Magazine*), proves that. She also wrote four pages of 'The Lost Child' on the reverse of carbon typescript pages from *Mary O'Grady*, a pattern suggesting Lavin was also an impatient writer, keen to get ideas down on paper as soon as possible.<sup>89</sup> The irony is that Virginia Woolf would not have approved of Lavin's recycling as she herself wrote in designate notebooks, hardly ever annotating a book she was reading.<sup>90</sup> Such haste to write is also evident in Lavin's private and business correspondence; her letters are rarely completed without revision and the medium in which she communicates varies according it would seem to what was close to hand: correspondence from her time in Rome includes a lengthy letter on graph paper and the headed notepaper from Abbey Farm often served more as a notepad than a formal record of communication.<sup>91</sup> Even typed correspondence was altered significantly before postage.

Lavin's reclamation of writing materials means other published short stories are literal repositories for reworking sections elsewhere. As an example, in September 2012, I discovered two short stories stapled together in Lavin's own personal copies of two of her collections (*The Stories of Mary Lavin*, Volume 1 and

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<sup>89</sup> ML 628, box 1, fol. 19: Gotlieb Archive.

<sup>90</sup> Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1996), pp. 411-414.

<sup>91</sup> ML 628: Gotlieb Archive.

*The Stories of Mary Lavin*, Volume 2) that make clear that Lavin's obsessive revisions did not always lead to published reformation of stories.<sup>92</sup> These, as always with Lavin's books, have ownership marks just inside the cover. With the assistance of archive staff I opened the stories, and, for preservation purposes, marked where the staples had been with plastic clips. 'Brigid' (Volume 2, 1974) was heavily revised, but had not been looked at presumably since Lavin herself stapled the pages of the story together (these were her personal property and no record has been made in the UCD archive of stapling the pages at UCD).

Tucked into the final pages of 'Frail Vessel' in a green cloth File copy of *The Stories* (1964) was a green and blue inked double-page manuscript. Further investigation proved it relates to the short story 'The Lost Child' in *Happiness and Other Stories* (1969).<sup>93</sup> As this is Lavin's own file copy of the collection, and had remained in the archive unopened for some time, if the repository story was stapled – who was the intended reader? Lavin's reputation as a writer who constantly revised her short stories for subsequent editions is well understood, so was this only staged revision and Lavin went on to make other notations elsewhere? In this instance yes, as the final published version of the story in *Happiness* is shorter. However, it is not possible to state that all drafts have been examined from all archive sources.<sup>94</sup> Such practice suggests there may have been a compulsive need in Lavin to maintain ownership of the fictions at various stages of her writing career regardless of whether changes were published or not. Or was this just, as Lavin said, acceptance that 're-

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<sup>92</sup> File copy of *The Stories of Mary Lavin* (1964). File copy of *The Stories of Mary Lavin*, Volume 2, 1974), ML papers: James Joyce Library.

<sup>93</sup> *Happiness and Other Stories* (London: Constable, 1969), pp. 101-152. The pages themselves relate to pages 139-140, but the manuscript is a bit longer than the final printed section. 1964 and 1970 versions of *The Stories of Mary Lavin* (London: Constable) viewed; 1964 File copy contained the manuscript.

<sup>94</sup> The second File copy of *The Stories* (rep. 1970) contained minor alterations to 'Frail Vessel'.

editing can be interesting and exciting’?<sup>95</sup> The discovery of unread revisions some seventeen years after Lavin’s death illustrates just how much work there is still yet to be done on Lavin’s fictions.

### **The short story**

The issues discussed so far, of textual form and history, come together in Lavin’s chosen genre of the short story. Lavin’s decision to work within the normalised expectations of the short story was perhaps a surprising choice, as her own method of writing was lengthy and involved. Yet short stories by writers such as Anton Chekhov and Katherine Mansfield, as Lavin revealed in interviews, clearly influenced how she could master the genre and reduce what were in some cases novel-length drafts (taking into account the numerous revised manuscripts) into carefully crafted and condensed narrative forms. Attention only to the physical span of the genre is problematic in that it overshadows more pertinent values of genre construction: the fragmentary narrative reflecting life’s disconnected and unresolved patterns, moments of elucidation, links with oral story-telling culture, or as Frank O’Connor posited, the ideal medium for the voice of a marginalised ‘submerged population group’.<sup>96</sup> Yet, constrained by its very nomenclature, the short story is fundamentally defined by size rather than content. Lavin used this very limitation to her advantage, asserting that:

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<sup>95</sup> Murphy, ‘Mary Lavin: An Interview’, p. 219.

<sup>96</sup> Frank O’Connor, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* [1963] (Hoboken, New Jersey: Melville House Publishing, 2004), p. 17. These values and others outside of the length of the narrative are examined in Mary Louise Pratt’s essay ‘The Short Story: The Long and the Short of It’, [1981] *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. by Charles E. May (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994), pp. 91-113.

[T]he short story aims at a particle of truth. I hope to convey something of what I have learned. I like its discipline, its combination of experience, imagination and technique. It combines them, compresses them, telescopes them, working towards a solution.<sup>97</sup>

South African writer Nadine Gordimer affirms both the precision and momentary illumination of the genre and the implicit specialised community of practitioners:

Short-story writers see by the light of the flash; theirs is the art of the only thing one can be sure of – the present moment. Ideally they have learned to do without explanation of what went before, and what happens beyond this point.<sup>98</sup>

Gordimer argues that a ‘discrete moment of truth is aimed at – not *the* moment of truth, because the short story doesn’t deal in cumulatives’.<sup>99</sup> All this comes within ‘a stricter technical discipline’ than the novel form yet, paradoxically, according to Gordimer, with a wider freedom amongst short story writers than novelists.

Although these comments were published some years apart, Maurice Harmon had met frequently with Lavin during the compilation of *Irish University Review*, Mary Lavin Special Issue (1979), and so Lavin’s comments in fact originate from that year, only three years after Gordimer’s.<sup>100</sup> The similarity of approach is worth noting, and illustrates the various means by which short story writers try to articulate a defence for the genre. In their public engagement with discussions of short story form and practice, their voices, and not just those of the critics, are heard.

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<sup>97</sup> Harmon, ‘From Conversations with Mary Lavin’, p. 288.

<sup>98</sup> Nadine Gordimer, ‘The Flash of Fireflies’, *Short Story Theories*, ed. by Charles E. May (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1976), pp. 178-181 (p. 180).

<sup>99</sup> Gordimer, ‘The Flash of Fireflies’, p. 180.

<sup>100</sup> See footnote 1 in Harmon, ‘From Conversations with Mary Lavin’, p. 287.

John Kenny supports this shift towards writers' own sense of their craft, and argues that we should pay attention to the 'formal ideas practitioners have had about their own short story writing, [and of] certain generalisations they have made based on their own developing experience of the craft'.<sup>101</sup> For a writer such as Eudora Welty, admired and befriended by Lavin, writing about the genre does become a form of defence. In her essay entitled 'The Reading and Writing of Short Stories', Welty writes of the divide between criticism and practice, admitting to being 'baffled by analysis and criticism' about some of her fictions.<sup>102</sup> Lavin, Gordimer and Welty make clear that the short story has an elusive quality to it, and that it is, according to Welty, 'a little world in space, just as we can isolate one star in the sky by a concentrated vision'.<sup>103</sup> These striking natural visual analogies (elsewhere Lavin also talks of the short story as 'a flash of forked lightning' in an interview with Catherine Murphy) say a great deal: just as a photograph captures a specific moment in time, framing visual detail and distinctiveness, and is unique in that it represents only that which is captured at that time, so the short story has the freedom to focus on a similar topical inclusiveness for however brief a time.<sup>104</sup> This can usefully be compared to a similar visual intensity in the work of American poet Emily Dickinson whose writing captures imagined or real images with connotations of much wider emotional resonances.<sup>105</sup> Lavin's poem 'Let Me Come Inland Always' (1952) and the opening of 'A Likely Story' (1967), her tale for children, sit comfortably alongside poems by Dickinson such as: 'South Winds jostle them' (c. 1859), 'Twas

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<sup>101</sup> John Kenny, 'Inside Out: A Working Theory of the Irish Short Story', p. 3

<<http://www.aran.library.nuigalway.ie/.../Inside%20%Out%20>> [accessed 8 November 2010].

<sup>102</sup> Eudora Welty, 'The Reading and Writing of Short Stories', *Short Story Theories*, ed. by Charles E. May (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1976), pp. 159-177 (p. 161).

<sup>103</sup> Welty, 'The Reading and Writing of Short Stories', p. 163.

<sup>104</sup> Mary Lavin in Catherine Murphy, 'Mary Lavin: an interview', p. 212.

<sup>105</sup> Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, ed. by Thomas H. Johnson (London; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1975).

such a little – little boat’ (c. 1859) or ‘A slash of Blue’ (c. 1860), where the natural world frames the suggestion of security for an individual.<sup>106</sup> In Lavin’s case the image of Bective ‘Like a bird in the nest’ creates a site of secrecy during the day, and some stature when lit at night.<sup>107</sup> Lavin claims Bective as a location of refuge. Dickinson disrupts a full sense of security through transient images of display, colour and then loss. Yet the import of these momentary images is such that they also connect the reader to familiar settings – the garden, the sea and the evening sky – marking viable association with the natural world. These realisations of what Edgar Allan Poe called ‘the immense force derivable from totality’, the impact of a reading in a single sitting, illustrate the intensity of the short story form for the reader also. Poe argues: ‘[d]uring the hour of perusal the soul of a reader is at the writer’s control. There are no external or extrinsic influences – resulting from weariness or interruption’ in a way that reading a novel might engender.<sup>108</sup> The short story therefore is the most obvious choice for a writer such as Lavin, whose curiosity about the human condition may be most fruitfully deployed within a genre that can isolate key moments for maximum impact.

### **Connections and revisions**

Understanding the interdependent nature of short story collections by a single author depends a great deal upon our willingness as readers to step away from a history of compartmentalising short stories and work towards more fluid readings between and across collections. Robert Luscher reminds us that:

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<sup>106</sup> Dickinson, *Poems*, pp. 44, 52, 95. Mary Lavin, *A Likely Story* (Ireland: Dolmen Press, 1967).

<sup>107</sup> Lavin, *A Likely Story*, p. 1.

<sup>108</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, ‘Review of Twice-Told Tales’, *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. by Charles E. May (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1994), pp. 59-72 (p. 61).

[a]lmost any short story, even the most self-contained and strikingly unified one, may be potentially enriched by the context that a group of similarly oriented stories by the same author provides.<sup>109</sup>

Whether that context is explicitly relayed to the reader or whether the writer relies on the reader's capacity to search for and maintain patterns of their own, it is worth examining Lavin's collections with this potential enrichment in mind. As a consequence, selected stories within Lavin's collections can be seen as representative of key repeated foci. The discussion of 'Sarah' in Chapter 2 offers a pertinent example of how Lavin's reworking of short stories alters our sense of the narratives. The extended revisions to stories, rather than merely altering grammatical or punctuation errors, suggest that Lavin's own perception of life in Ireland altered over time, and 'Sarah' in particular reflects a negative shift towards retribution rather than empathy, as will be seen in my reading. This short story first appears in Lavin's earliest published collection of short stories entitled *Tales from Bective Bridge*: the title firmly locates her interests in a discernibly Irish vein as it positions the short stories within an important topographical and architectural frame of reference.<sup>110</sup> It was here in Westmeath that Lavin spent a great deal of time during her teenage years and in her early married life. The title of the collection sets up a presumed common linkage between these first stories and the Irish landscape: whether that is psychological or physical, as Marie Arndt suggests, it is a connection fashioned in

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<sup>109</sup> Robert M. Luscher, 'The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book', *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, ed. by Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey (Baton Rouge; London: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), pp. 148-167.

<sup>110</sup> Mary Lavin, *Tales from Bective Bridge* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1942); (London: Michael Joseph, 1943, 1945).

multiple forms here and in future short story collections.<sup>111</sup> Lavin's negotiation between the artistic and social circumstances of her life forms the backdrop to this collection.<sup>112</sup> *Tales from Bective Bridge* may appear at first as a set of incongruously positioned narratives, but there is an organisational strategy inherent in that collection, as in others, that anticipates a final body of work closely linked over time. That linkage can be most effectively interpreted in terms of interwoven narratives, connecting and supporting developing themes. Lavin's focus throughout her oeuvre on the lives of Irish men and women forms the keystone to that strategy.

Whilst the stories in *Tales from Bective Bridge* range over different topographies - farmland, a monastery, a fishing community, village and town life, the city and the realm of the supernatural - the atmospheres and locations generated are closely allied to an understanding of Irish life. The architectural designation embedded in the title of Lavin's first collection generates links with the geography of Bective that was to prove so influential on Lavin's writing. The *Tales from Bective Bridge* stories are also linked by abstract concepts of loss and isolation; interestingly, these fundamental levels of interest contextualise her fictions within contemporary thinking on society and its constraints. Indeed, Lavin's work mirrors shifts of interest internationally in psychology and sociology in the 1940s and 1950s, as part of which social relationships, the individual's place in society, social order and how conflict could be managed became key foci. The main protagonist in 'Brother Boniface' from *Tales from Bective Bridge* for instance, exemplifies a human need to feel physiologically and psychologically safe, to find a place of belonging and then achieve some sense of self-esteem. In this case life in a religious community leads

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<sup>111</sup> Marie Arndt, 'Narratives of Internal Exile in Mary Lavin's Short Stories', *International Journal of English Studies*, 2:2 (2002), 109-122.

<sup>112</sup> Scott, 'Mary Lavin and the Life of the Mind', 262-278.



Boniface towards self-actualization and the realisation of his own potential.

However, Lavin's own fascination with the inter-relationship between the individual and society does more than merely echo contemporaneous research; that interest generates fictions driven by Lavin's desire to represent faithfully the lives of Irish men and women as she sees them.

Lavin's short story collections that emerge from the 1940s reflect a period of international turmoil leading up to and beyond the Second World War. Yet they are couched within, and clearly attuned to, national and local concerns. Lavin engages with a number of issues surrounding the role of the family, inheritance and the close relationship between the Catholic Church and the State. These provide an early career platform from which Lavin establishes her reputation. In the following chapter, a number of close, extended readings will provide access to those short stories not often republished. These readings are driven by the recognition that Lavin writes 'from experience', and re-fashions that with which she is familiar.<sup>113</sup> The 1940s fictions are some of her most original work, and deserved of particular attention.

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<sup>113</sup> Aileen Orpen, 'Mary Lavin', *Irish Times*, 6 August 1970, p. 12.

## Chapter 2

### Conflict and Change: The 1940s fictions

The 1940s were a key period for Mary Lavin; her reputation was built and established in what was a crucial and defining period in twentieth-century history. Yet Augustine Martin somewhat poetically suggests her fictions were set apart from ‘the public debates that flickered across the screen of the nation’s life’ at that time, to some extent deflecting readers from understanding the true range of Lavin’s oeuvre.<sup>1</sup> This fails fully to recognise the subtle nuances of her work: the understated resonances in the fictions that indeed were addressing the impact of the Constitution, and issues surrounding Irish neutrality, emigration and censorship. It is the private focus in Lavin’s fictions that Martin acknowledges. Paradoxically, this is couched in comprehensive terms as he adds: ‘she has fashioned perhaps *the most complete* fictional tapestry of middle Ireland about its daily business’ [my emphasis].<sup>2</sup> This unconvincing brief assessment also reads Lavin (alongside Francis MacManus) as set apart from what Martin labels the earlier ‘traumata of armed uprising or guerrilla warfare’.<sup>3</sup> Whilst this may be because it is part of an introductory overview of Irish fiction in the *Field Day Anthology*, and the tenor is complimentary overall, his estimation of the scope and impact of Lavin’s short stories is somewhat limited here; this despite his notable early admiration of Lavin’s work in ‘A Skeleton Key to the Stories of Mary Lavin’ (1963). ‘A Skeleton Key’ had promised so much for Lavin as a writer and recognised the lack of critical work available at that time. This shift in attitude of one who knew her well highlights the need for a reappraisal of Lavin’s

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine Martin, ‘Prose Fiction 1880-1945’, *The Field Day Anthology*, Volume 2, ed. by Seamus Deane (Derry: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1991), p. 1024.

<sup>2</sup> Martin, ‘Prose Fiction’, p. 1024.

<sup>3</sup> Martin, ‘Prose Fiction’, p. 1024.

oeuvre, as recognition of her work appears to fade over time even in the most ardent of her supporters. The 1940s short story collections do indeed generate an inclusive picture, but it is complex and multi-faceted. The 1940s collections have an extensive range of concern, and the very first collection *Tales from Bective Bridge* (1942) begins to mark those fields of interest: Lavin engages with issues surrounding the family, illegitimacy, emigration, issues of commerce, death, responses to Church doctrine and the Big House narrative.

The short story collections and novels produced in the 1940s were well received, although it took some time for critical engagement with her work to emerge. In his essay on *Tales from Bective Bridge*, Professor Roger Chauviré, Lavin's French lecturer at UCD, highlights 'an utmost precision, a graphic vividness which would do honour to a painter' in her fiction.<sup>4</sup> This visual acuity is indeed a significant feature of her entire oeuvre. Overall, whilst Chauviré somehow manages to adopt both a paternalistic tenor and somewhat poetic analysis, he does get to the core of what makes Lavin noteworthy. He argues that Lavin is a poet and storyteller who 'can read souls as she would an open book', but whose parochial focus in no way detracts from the breadth of her art.<sup>5</sup> Chauviré's allusions to alchemy, treasure troves and natural methodologies of production as part of Lavin's creative distinction are in themselves noteworthy:

Mary Lavin has that beautiful knack of extracting from the miserable dregs  
the drop of elixir they concealed [...] There is a crock of gold in every

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<sup>4</sup> Roger Chauviré, 'The Art of Mary Lavin: (*Tales From Bective Bridge*)', *The Bell*, 11, October 1945, pp. 600-9 (p. 601). Also cited in Caroline Walsh, 'Mary Lavin (1912-1996)', *The UCD Aesthetic: Celebrating 150 Years of UCD Writers*, ed. by Anthony Roche (Dublin: New Island, 2005), pp. 122-129.

<sup>5</sup> Chauviré, 'Art', p. 602.

existence; everybody's only task is to discover it [...] She writes as a bee makes honey, with that infallible perfection of instinct.<sup>6</sup>

He builds a picture of almost effortless, instinctive creativity on Lavin's part, underscored with connotations of industrious activity. Published in 1945, Chauviré's was the first commentary on the actuality of Lavin's labour intensive writing process. This current reappraisal of Lavin's short stories draws attention to that process and the many implications it has for readings of her fictions. However, it is Chauviré's essay that marks the foundation for what is a much later critical trail. Lavin's future success was undoubtedly of great importance to him: in spite of the *Irish Times*' earlier rejection of his article 'The Art of Mary Lavin', and in anticipation of publication in *The Bell*, Chauviré wrote to Lavin stressing 'What I want is to help you and to tell people of your grand work, if I may'.<sup>7</sup> His confidence in her was to be met.

### **Early support**

At the turn of the decade Lavin had completed short stories which were published on both sides of the Atlantic, a somewhat fitting maintenance of, and association with, her birthplace. Seamus O'Sullivan, then editor of *Dublin Magazine*, had accepted 'Miss Holland' for publication in the April-June edition of 1939, and later in 1940 'The Green Grave and the Black Grave' was published by *Atlantic Monthly*. Richard Peterson claims Seamus O'Sullivan as a 'catalyst' in accepting her first story as she had had several magazine rejections before.<sup>8</sup> The opportunity afforded her by O'Sullivan's interest cannot be underestimated in light of later publication in

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<sup>6</sup> Chauviré, 'Art', p. 606, p. 608.

<sup>7</sup> Roger Chauviré, letter dated 9 May 1945, fol. 8: James Joyce Library.

<sup>8</sup> Richard F. Peterson, *Mary Lavin* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), p. 20.

America and in terms of establishing strong professional links there. However, Lord Dunsany's interest should also rank as a determining factor; Lavin's work appeared in 1940 and 1941 in *Atlantic Monthly* following his recommendation.<sup>9</sup>

Lord Dunsany offered Lavin support and encouragement at a very early stage in her career: he himself was a well-respected writer of fantasy, science fiction, drama and poetry, and he wrote the preface to Lavin's first collection, *Tales from Bective Bridge*. Here there is marked endorsement for Lavin and her work. Dunsany reflects that upon reading her earlier short stories he 'had no advice whatsoever to give her about literature; so I have only helped her with her punctuation, which was bad'.<sup>10</sup> Lavin revealed much later that this placed an enormous responsibility on her at the beginning of her career as 'no young girl could be the equal of Tolstoy', adding 'I must have some tremendous tenacity that I ever wrote another line after that'.<sup>11</sup> His fulsome praise continues as he challenges readers to:

[T]ake a page at random from 'The Green Grave and the Black Grave' and compared with a random page of any novelist of the present century, to see which page evokes the vividest pictures.<sup>12</sup>

There is no doubt that he is indicating that Lavin would be the winner every time.

In a letter to Ellery Sedgwick, editor of *Atlantic Monthly* (1909-1938), Lavin acknowledges Dunsany's support as she discusses two stories he sent to his friend Sedgwick: 'The Nun's Mother' and 'Say Could That Lad Be I?'.<sup>13</sup> The letter is

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<sup>9</sup> Peterson, *Mary Lavin*, p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> Dunsany, 'Preface' to *Tales from Bective Bridge*, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Leland, 'Mary Lavin in Cork', *Irish Times*, 23 November 1977, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Dunsany, 'Preface' to *Tales from Bective Bridge*, p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Letter to Ellery Sedgwick from Mary Lavin dated 30 January 1940: Massachusetts Historical Society.

remarkably personal and expansive for a newly published author; it reveals a great deal about Lavin's approach to writing and her concerns about the suitability of some of her work for publication. There is already some sense of the protégé moving beyond her mentor, as she is evidently trying to control final distribution of her work. Interpreting Sedgwick's 'delicacy' of criticism she suggests 'The Nun's Mother' may be misconstrued by 'people outside of the church as one more excuse for sneering at Christianity in general' and says:

[M]y objection to the story is that it might be classed as cheap anti-clerical writing, and now, more than ever, in this time of war and irreligion, I should not want to convey this impression.<sup>14</sup>

Her keen sensibility surrounding the public mood on both sides of the Atlantic, coupled with a resolute belief in the integrity of her own work is evident in this letter. Lavin's concerns are rooted in a culture of formal and informal censorship that had prevailed in Ireland since the Censorship of Publications Act (1929) and there must have been serious worries about damage to her reputation at home and abroad. Although for some negative reception may have been a badge of honour or a matter of humour, for Lavin that was not the case.<sup>15</sup> Her youngest daughter Caroline always retained the belief that her mother would never have done anything to harm the family in any way. This is made clear in Elizabeth Walsh Peavoy's article in *Inside Tribune*; Mary Lavin put her daughters first even when times were difficult in widowhood.<sup>16</sup> While this letter to Sedgwick was written before marriage and

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<sup>14</sup>Letter to Sedgwick dated 30 January 1940: MHS.

<sup>15</sup> Benedict Kiely, 'The Personal Experience of Censorship'; *Banned in Ireland: Censorship and the Irish Writer*, ed. by Julia Carlson (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 23-35 (p. 23, p. 26).

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Walsh Peavoy, 'Elizabeth Peavoy writes about her mother the writer Mary Lavin', *Inside Tribune*, 24 March 1985, press cuttings, fol. 1: James Joyce Library.

motherhood, Lavin's reputation as a new writer evidently mattered to her. On the other hand, Sedgwick had written this to Lavin about 'The Nun's Mother':

The theme of your story is a very delicate one, for the link between the dedicated life and natural passions of the flesh is not often dwelt upon and I can see how among many Catholics your story might be read with a certain – what shall I say – unease is certainly an understatement [*sic*].<sup>17</sup>

Sedgwick's reticence may be rooted in publishing and profit considerations but as Lavin's writing uncovers what V. S. Pritchett asserts is 'the smoldering [*sic*] of a hidden life' with all the accompanying connotations that promises, there are evident tensions between the freedom of artistic expression, professional and economic success and personal responsibilities.<sup>18</sup> The creative decision to lay bare sexual desire in this story not only has to be balanced against contemporaneous discretions but also Lavin's own relationship with the Catholic Church. In that respect, Lavin's understanding of potential reactions from target audiences astutely protects both her freedom to comment and the reputation of the Church. She displays great sensitivity whilst deliberating about publication of 'The Nun's Mother', a story that tests intellectual, emotional and religious boundaries. It questions the practice of celibacy, the complexities surrounding parental acceptance of choices made by their children, and openly addresses the normative silences surrounding married intimacy.

The correspondence with Sedgwick reveals much more than simply contractual continuity; despite being at an early stage of her career, Lavin conveys confidence in her ability to discriminate in the future selection of appropriate stories

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<sup>17</sup> Letter from Ellery Sedgwick to Mary Lavin dated 12 December 1939: Gotlieb Archive.

<sup>18</sup> V. S. Pritchett, 'Introduction' to *Collected Stories* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), p. x.

for publication.<sup>19</sup> Paradoxically, Lavin also seeks approval by putting forward ‘Lilacs’, ‘The Black Grave’ and ‘Love is For Lovers’ for Sedgwick’s attention, whilst at the same time denying they would be suitable for *Atlantic Monthly*. This is no false modesty: insecurity and uncertainty dogged her throughout her writing career as correspondence to family, friends and professional acquaintances such as Sedgwick reveals.

Lavin’s reticence about misinterpretation is indicative of a particular frame of mind in the period. Even as late as the 1950s a climate of restriction still persisted in Ireland; how to circumnavigate that was a serious consideration for artists and writers and their work. For instance, Maura Laverty refused to allow her essay ‘Woman-shy Irishmen’ to be published in the second edition of *The Vanishing Irish* (1954) despite it having been included in the earlier American edition (1953). In its original form it is an outspoken discourse on the sexual indifference of contemporary Irishmen, who in reality Laverty sees as far removed from the ‘dashing and impetuous [...] Irishman of the novel and film’.<sup>20</sup> Laverty was concerned enough to write to the publishers refusing permission for re-publication and was successful in removing the essay. Laverty had also received unfavourable correspondence from readers after publication of an article in *Pageant* was made without her knowledge or permission. This suggests Laverty’s caution was well-placed.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Lavin continued to be on equally good terms with Edward Weeks (editor 1938-1966), but the letters reflect a more formal relationship.

<sup>20</sup> Maura Laverty, ‘Woman-shy Irishmen’, *The Vanishing Irish: The Enigma of the Modern World*, ed. by John A. O’Brien (New York, Toronto and London: McGraw-Hill, 1953), pp. 50-59.

<sup>21</sup> Maura Laverty papers, ACC 4607, box 1/10, fol. 1: National Library of Ireland, Dublin. Roger Gorman, editor of *The Sign*, commiserates in his letter to Laverty dated 24 March, 1954 about the backlash.



Outside of *The Atlantic Monthly* interest in Lavin's work grew throughout the decade: publication of *Tales from Bective Bridge* (1942), *The Long Ago and Other Stories* (1944), *The Becker Wives and Other Stories* (1946) and *At Sallygap and Other Stories* (1947) followed with two novels, *The House in Clewe Street* (1945) and *Mary O'Grady* (1950). However, the novels seemed less successful, and were dismissed rather harshly as '[t]wo bad novels' by Mary Lavin herself.<sup>22</sup> Despite some negative responses, notably one by Kate O'Brien, who suggests Lavin lacked the novelist's 'passion' and seemed 'tired' by the text itself, there were valuable insights into what Lavin could produce in the short stories.<sup>23</sup> Francis Hackett's review of *The House in Clewe Street* recognises the methodology at the very heart of Lavin's writing:

Miss Lavin does not evade the sordidness common to all stagnant communities. Her imaginative demands are too resolute, too independent, too fortified by inner dignity, to permit either evasion or submission.<sup>24</sup>

Dan Norton notes *The House in Clewe Street* 'is rich with the truth of commonplace things' and whilst detecting some imbalance in a notable character, values the 'hundred details of voice and turn of phrase, of dress and gesture [whilst recreating] the intricate rhythm of village life, with its conscious and unconscious rituals'.<sup>25</sup> Although Hackett and Norton are responding to the novel, their observations are also relevant to the short stories. Lavin's attention to fine detail and courage in engaging

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<sup>22</sup> Marianne Koenig, 'Mary Lavin: The Novels and the Stories', *Irish University Review*, 9:2 (Autumn 1979), 244-261 (p. 244).

<sup>23</sup> Kate O'Brien, 'Short Stories – In and Out of Place', *Irish Times*, 5 January 1946, p. 4. It did not help Lavin's case that O'Brien was reviewing Elizabeth Bowen's *The Demon Lover* in the same column.

<sup>24</sup> Francis Hackett, 'Books of the Times', *New York Times*, 26 May 1945, p. 13.

<sup>25</sup> Dan S. Norton, 'The Coniffes of Castlerampart', *New York Times*, 27 May 1945, p. 79.

honestly with the challenges experienced by small-town communities is a feature throughout her oeuvre.

Alongside her professional productivity this was also a challenging period personally for Lavin. She had married and had two daughters by 1945, but also lost her father in the same year. For a writer who always maintained that she put her family before her writing, such productivity is remarkable at this time. If Lavin did not hide the strains she sometimes felt between her roles as a mother and a writer, neither did she dwell on them. In the preface to *Selected Stories* (1959) she pragmatically reveals that ‘the actual writing down of stories has been done in snatches of time filched from other duties’, a comment reiterated later to Aileen Orpen in her interview.<sup>26</sup> Somehow this fragmentary process was a fruitful one for her. Indeed, the short story genuinely appeared to work for her stylistically, as well as being a practical medium that allowed her to write over extended periods, taking into account these personal commitments. Each story had numerous drafts and two or more narratives were worked on at the same time. In a documentary made and aired in the later stages of Lavin’s life, Caroline Walsh remembers her mother would write in big green notebooks and would have begun writing in the early morning, before her daughters left for school, and continued during the day in Bewley’s Café, Grafton Street and the National Library.<sup>27</sup> Bewley’s position as part of the cultural capital of Ireland is well-documented and Lavin’s place amongst a long list of writers, artists and theatre personnel was noted in Hugh Oram’s article for the *Irish*

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<sup>26</sup> Mary Lavin, ‘Preface’ to *Selected Stories* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959). Aileen Orpen, ‘Mary Lavin’, *Irish Times*, 6 August 1970, p. 12.

<sup>27</sup> Cian O’hEigeartaigh, ‘An Arrow in Flight’, RTÉ, 1992: produced and directed by Cian O’hEigeartaigh.

*Times* in 2004.<sup>28</sup> Writer, journalist and protégé, Nuala O’Faolain, also remembers Lavin working in the National Library in the 1950s.<sup>29</sup>

### **Reworking texts**

As Angeline Kelly highlights in one of the main studies of Lavin’s work, far from casting early collections in stone, Lavin makes significant alterations to key short stories from across this decade in subsequent publications and these alterations are noteworthy enough to impact to a lesser or greater degree on later readings of those narratives.<sup>30</sup> Kelly notes that ‘factual accuracy, stylistic cohesion [or elucidation of] aesthetic, and sometimes moral intention’ are key drivers.<sup>31</sup> Lavin wrote multiple staged versions of each short story. Once initial ideas were committed to paper, the early drafts increased in length and had to be condensed significantly, with adjustment even between proof copy and the published edition. Even after publication, Lavin made corrections on the pages of editions that she came across: copies of various short story collections held in Meath Library, Navan, and the James Joyce Library, UCD, illustrate the extent of these corrections. With each new collection this process continued.<sup>32</sup> Research on specific narratives by Janet Egleson Dunleavy, ‘The Making of Mary Lavin’s “Happiness”’ and ‘The Making of Mary

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<sup>28</sup> Hugh Oram, ‘No More the Nostalgic Aroma of Coffee or the Touch of Sticky Buns’, *Irish Times*, 30 October 2004, p. 3; cited in Kieran Bonner, ‘A Fry-Up and an Espresso: Bewley’s Café and Cosmopolitan Dublin’, *New Hibernia Review*, 11: 3 (Autumn 2007), 9-27 (pp. 15-16).

<sup>29</sup> Nuala O’Faolain, *Are You Somebody? The Life and Times of Nuala O’Faolain* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1996), pp. 79-80.

<sup>30</sup> A. A. Kelly, *Mary Lavin: Quiet Rebel* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1980), pp. 139-168.

<sup>31</sup> Kelly, *Mary Lavin*, p. 168.

<sup>32</sup> This aspect of her writing is recorded in reference texts, but not always made use of in critical interpretations of Lavin’s work. See Janet Egleson Dunleavy in *British Novelists 1930-1959*, ed. by Bernard Oldsey (Detroit, MI: Gale, 1983), pp. 261-269. Also Greg C. Winston in Cheryl Alexander Malcolm and David Malcolm, *Dictionary of Literary Biography: British and Irish Short Fiction Writers*, Volume 319 (MI, USA: University of Gdansk Thomson Gale, 2006), pp. 151-164.

Lavin's "A Memory", illustrates just how detailed and lengthy a process this was.<sup>33</sup> However, this recognition is redundant if, each time an entry or essay on Lavin appears subsequent to studies such as Egleson Dunleavy's, the title of a story is deemed the only crucial identifier. Reference to published edition or draft manuscript is crucial, otherwise ongoing critical discourse becomes tainted by inaccuracies.

Some short stories reveal the impact of Lavin's modifications more obviously than others. Where the tenor of a story shifts markedly, as in revised versions of 'Sarah', it creates a strikingly alternate reading, refusing sympathies that were engendered in earlier versions of the text. This suggests Lavin is either responding to a shift in social mood or modifying her personal commitment to a theme. Where the revisions are minor it can be interpreted as an opportunity to improve the quality of the work, or simply proofreading with hindsight. However, Lavin's interventions do exhibit traits of obsession and at best control about the process, analogous to a similar course of action remarked upon by Frank O'Connor about rewriting his own work '[e]ndlessly, endlessly, endlessly'.<sup>34</sup> This mode of revising published work was heavily criticised by Sean O'Faolain, yet Lavin rejected his arguments in favour of editorial control over her work and what she believed was best practice.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Janet Egleson Dunleavy, 'The Making of Mary Lavin's "Happiness"', *Irish University Review*, 9:2 (Autumn 1979), 225-232; 'The Making of Mary Lavin's "A Memory"', *Éire-Ireland*, 12 (1977), 90-99.

<sup>34</sup> Anthony Whittier, 'Frank O'Connor: The Art of Fiction No. 19', *Paris Review*, 17 (Autumn-Winter 1957) <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4847/the-art-of-fiction-no-19-frank-oconnor>> [accessed 7 March 2012] (para. 21 of 74).

<sup>35</sup> Maev Kennedy, 'Mary Lavin', *Irish Times*, 13 March 1976, p. 4.

### 1940s realist fictions

A key locus for Lavin in the 1940s collections is the family. Regardless of how that manifests itself in the particularity of constitution, circumstance and milieu, in microcosm it serves as a significant reflection on Irish society. In light of the spare nature of the short story, characters are established through a narrator's informed viewpoint. This may be practical descriptive focus on physique, mannerisms or dress, in some cases with an individual history prior to the existing narrative. Whilst this assumes the convention of reciprocity between reader and storyteller, and in some ways foregrounds the artificiality of the fiction, it also creates the closest approximation to an appropriate realist environment. Compression of time through character histories means that the reader is situated within a narrative continuum that appears familiar in its frame of reference and action. In 'Sarah' (*Tales from Bective Bridge*) we learn the chief protagonist is labelled as both an unmarried mother with a reputation and a valued worker. The suggestion of the potential damage her unrestrained sexual behaviour may engender within a Catholic community is offset by the positive subjective marker offered by the narrator. Such damage limitation privileges Sarah, creating what Wayne C. Booth marks as 'particularity and autonomy'.<sup>36</sup> This makes a character seem like a real person with all the complexity of positive attributes and negative flaws present

Whilst Booth is responding to Ian Watt's analysis of the novel and realism, and has problems with Watts' comments on authorial intrusions and their impact on this realist intent, he adds a valid cautionary note: 'Each man trusts his own brand of reality, and the seeming agreement about the importance of a natural surface breaks

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<sup>36</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd edition (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 41.

down as soon as we compare doctrines in detail'.<sup>37</sup> This interpretative harmony runs a similar risk to close reading of an impressionist painting; it is far more difficult if we examine too closely the fine print or brushwork of the artist. Booth's reservations about how individual interpretation overshadows perceived consensus are justified, whereas Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth's strategy of reading the realist mode with a 'perspective system' suggests total collapse is not inevitable.<sup>38</sup> Ermarth reiterates that there has to be some sort of consensus about what is perceived as a realist environment, and this system removes the pressure, if you will, of the detail that may cause consensus to fail, providing a 'common horizon'.<sup>39</sup> However, rather than focusing negatively on perceived differences of interpretation as Booth does, Ermarth embraces the notion of various points of view to 'find the form of the whole in what looks from a closer vantage point like a discontinuous array of specific cases'.<sup>40</sup> This plurality of vision puts a positive spin on what Booth saw as a negative: consensus through convention orientates what we understand as representation of reality. Through an objective 'management of distance', recognised patterns can be measured and agreed upon.<sup>41</sup> If an appropriate distance or objectivity is maintained from the source of interest, for instance a painting or novel or indeed a short story, then a certain truth or viability about its content can be readily agreed. The conventions of reading a text would then support a realisation of authenticity or verisimilitude in its contents. Ermarth's discussion of realism allows us to understand narrative as a matter of approach and perspective. Lavin's unique

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<sup>37</sup> Booth, *Rhetoric*, p. 42.

<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus in the Novel: Time, Space and Narrative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. xxi.

<sup>39</sup> Ermarth, *Realism*, p. 21.

<sup>40</sup> Ermarth, *Realism*, p. 35.

<sup>41</sup> Ermarth, *Realism*, p. 35.

narrative management of distance and empathy can be better understood in these terms.

Lavin maintains a fine balancing act in offering that objective distance: she is never afraid to be critical or to expose weakness in those systems she has issues with and yet Lavin reveals great sympathy with, and empathy for, individuals within those systems. This apparent tension strengthens rather than diminishes her work. The interconnected nature of Lavin's construction of realism complements Raymond Williams' sense that in such fiction, '[e]very aspect of personal life is radically affected by the quality of the general life, yet the general life is seen at its most important in completely personal terms'.<sup>42</sup> Williams recognises that this is not always fully understood by novelists (his main focus here) who fail 'to realize the extent to which the substance of a general way of life actively affects the closest personal experience'.<sup>43</sup> Lavin's focus on the relationship between individuals and wider impact circles within Irish communities, clearly acknowledges public affect upon private life.

There is clear evidence from interviews and archival sources that the fictions and Lavin's own life-experience were closely meshed. Although the basis of a character might emerge from an acute observation of domestic or public sources, it would always develop further. Lavin herself was keen to establish that distinction, commenting 'I don't think I have ever written directly with anything like fidelity about a real person whom I have known'.<sup>44</sup> Yet she was equally concerned not to be

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<sup>42</sup> Raymond Williams, 'Realism and the Contemporary Novel', *20th Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*, ed. by David Lodge (London; New York: Longman, 1991), pp. 581-591 (p. 584).

<sup>43</sup> Williams, 'Realism', p. 587.

<sup>44</sup> Catherine Murphy, 'Mary Lavin: An Interview', *Irish University Review*, Mary Lavin Special Issue, 9:2 (Autumn 1979), 207-224 (p. 208).

‘outed’ because the lines had been blurred in the transition from what was known to what was eventually imagined. In her interview with Catherine Murphy, Lavin said:

It might interest you to know that when I wrote *The Will*, which must have been early in my career, probably the fourth or fifth story I wrote, I was afraid someone in the family would recognise traits of my aunt in the fictitious character. But of course, no-one did – Lally was only an objectification of a concept.<sup>45</sup>

Speaking about that central character Lally from ‘The Will’, she freely admitted that her personal reaction to her grandmother leaving an aunt of hers out of her will because she had married against her wishes, was one of shock ‘at the injustice of it’.<sup>46</sup> The memory remained and Lavin, ever conscious of social sensibilities, reveals:

I based the character of ‘The Will’ on that aunt. She pitted herself against her mother, her family and the Church, at a time when to do so was very uncommon.<sup>47</sup>

Yet Lavin denies that the translation of the real woman to the fictional is purely an autobiographical one; the aunt had merely ‘embodied the concept of a certain kind of person’.<sup>48</sup> The creative distinction is upheld, with an acknowledgement that rural life existed as she portrayed it, and the occupants were every bit as complex and challenging as the readers themselves were and are. Whilst here Lavin goes some way towards revealing her engagement with what is already known to her, close

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<sup>45</sup> Murphy, ‘Mary Lavin’, p. 208.

<sup>46</sup> Murphy, ‘Mary Lavin’, p. 208. Mary Lavin, ‘The Will’, *The Long Ago & Other Stories* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd, 1945), pp. 7-21. All further references are to this edition.

<sup>47</sup> Murphy, ‘Mary Lavin’, p. 208.

<sup>48</sup> Murphy, ‘Mary Lavin’, p. 209.



reading of the stories also suggests a broader understanding of the contemporaneous social context. The transatlantic journey in her own life and those of her parents' resonates in stories connected with emigration such as 'At Sallygap', 'Lemonade' and 'Tom', also in the Big House narratives: 'Magenta', 'The Joy Ride' and 'Scylla and Charybdis'. However, whilst they are deeply rooted in the Lavin family experience, located at the borderland of autobiography and fiction, they also contribute meaningfully to the wider national narrative of emigration experience.

In the following section, a chronological look at key stories from the 1940s collections will establish evident patterns of interest in the family. Each close reading illustrates Lavin's consistent approach to representing the inescapable relationship between an individual and society. I begin with a reading of 'Sarah'. This offers a similar understanding of social context to the aforementioned stories, but in particular focuses on the complex position some women found themselves faced with if their behaviour, or the behaviour of those known to them, transgressed contemporary religious or social norms. It raises questions about how far community and family support extends before it is revoked. The subject-matters of nation, of illegitimacy, adultery and betrayal in the narrative run alongside more conservative values enshrined within marriage, monogamy and loyalty. What 'Sarah' displays in this first collection is Lavin's confidence in interrogating mid-twentieth century values and norms. It moves beyond a black and white template of existence, marking the complexity of human life. It is deserving of a detailed reading.

'Sarah' is a third-person omniscient narration from *Tales from Bective Bridge*. It tells the story of a young unmarried mother of three who falls pregnant for the fourth time. In many ways the narrative offers a sympathetic treatment of Sarah

the transgressor, despite the blunt introduction to her in the opening line: ‘Sarah had a bit of a bad name’.<sup>49</sup> The local midwife, while suggesting Sarah is perhaps illegitimate herself, alludes to Catholic doctrine in her support and justification of Sarah as an individual: ‘She is a good girl at heart [...] We are all born with a tendency to evil’ (‘Sarah’, p. 48). The doctrine of original sin is upheld in the Catholic Church and all newborns are seen to have entered into this world tainted by the sins of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Consequently they are baptised as soon as possible, to cleanse their souls and become part of the church. I would argue that this normative, public statement of religious acceptance translates to the midwife’s acknowledgement of collective experience and sin in her statement. Bound up as it is in the narrative, it goes a long way to validate Sarah’s position in the community, and to make sense of the perceived acceptance of her by the women in the village. There is almost a sigh of resignation echoing in the background as Mrs Muldoon the midwife speaks. Angeline Kelly suggests that ‘[t]he authority of the Catholic Church is stressed in all Mary Lavin’s early work’, but it could still be argued that this holds limited social power alone.<sup>50</sup> However, set alongside the far-reaching secular changes to the Irish Constitution it is possible in this story to envisage an all-encompassing paradigm of conduct which Irish women could be forced to adopt.

Nevertheless, Sarah is located well outside of Eamon de Valera’s ideal female role model as suggested by revision of Article 41 of the 1937 Constitution. One reading of the narrative could be that she holds power outside of the home by her obvious sexuality: men are attracted to her and local women are ‘filled with a

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<sup>49</sup> Mary Lavin, ‘Sarah’, *Tales from Bective Bridge* [1942] (London: Michael Joseph, 1945), p. 48. All further references are to this edition unless otherwise stated, and are given in the text.

<sup>50</sup> Kelly, *Mary Lavin*, p. 89.

strange uncontrollable envy of her youth and her brazen mind, and her slow leopardy beauty' ('Sarah', p. 50). In part this natural stimulation of sexual instinct in others plays into the pastoral milieu that de Valera posited in his St Patrick's Day speech but is driven further by the framed focus on animal attractiveness. It is a wild predatory beauty, suggesting that regardless of whatever reciprocal relationships transpire, Sarah appears to initiate interest by her very presence. This allusion to animals, in particular large felines, is repeated elsewhere in Lavin's tales, as for instance with Flora in 'The Becker Wives', where it assumes a far darker presence.

A number of legislative changes prior to publication of Lavin's first short story collection establish a background against which 'Sarah' can now be read. Most significant are the medical and religious restrictions in The Criminal Law Amendment Act (1935) which outlawed the importation and sale of contraceptives, and The Censorship of Publications Act (1929), intended to protect readers from immoral content from overseas. This resulted in an official silence surrounding some medical as well as popular literature. 'Sarah' highlights the inherent dangers imposed on women who are active sexually but denied the security of contraception. It exposes the reality of women's lives, inside and outside of marriage. Mary Kenny's succinct comment inserted into her review of *The Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories* reduces this reality to 'a cruel double standard of morals whereby men played and women paid'.<sup>51</sup> In this short story, the social alliance of secular and religious jurisdiction is juxtaposed against a fictional nonconformist free spirit in the main protagonist. Sarah has already had three children when the story opens – there is some debate as to who their father might be. Lavin teases us with the phrase,

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<sup>51</sup> Mary Kenny, 'A Nation Consumed by Death', *Catholic Herald*, 23 June 1989, p. 6  
<<http://archive.catholicherald.co.uk/article/23rd-june-1989/6/a-nation-consumed-by-death>>  
[accessed 28 February 2012].

‘there was a certain fortuity in her choice of fathers for them’ (‘Sarah’, p. 48). This suggests autonomy and control over her circumstances, but Sarah is still confined to the family farm housekeeping for her brothers, handing over her wages to them. The implication is that she has to seek work outside of the home, a direct contravention of the ideal suggested in the Constitution. There is little to suggest financial benefit in all her paternity choices, if we are to believe this autonomy is present, although a local man called Molloy is mentioned in terms of potential support should the need arise by her brother Pat.

The issue of paternity is one also discussed by Donna Potts in ‘Reviving the Lass of Aughrim’; working from a later version of the story she intimates that the brothers may well have fathered Sarah’s children.<sup>52</sup> Their secrecy amongst themselves and towards the local priest offers the possibility of an alternative route for the reader – that of abusive incestuous behaviour. This hinges on the fact that most unmarried young girls about to give birth would have been sent to a Home or Magdalene institution, but in this story each time Sarah remains at the family residence. Is that, Potts suggests, because the brothers had abused Sarah and so felt a sense of responsibility? The earlier version (1942; reprinted 1945) does not substantiate that reading, however. There, the brothers are referred to as uncles. Fewer ancestral identifiers are present to connote paternity; the older brother is named as Pat but the younger remains unidentified and so the issue of paternity is made even more questionable by the absence of all family names. The family surname is also withheld until the anonymous letter is introduced into the narrative. In the 1974 version of ‘Sarah’, the family surname Murray is introduced early on in

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<sup>52</sup> Donna L. Potts, ‘Reviving the Lass of Aughrim: Mary Lavin’s “Sarah”’, *Celtic Cultural Studies*, 6 (2007) <<http://www.celtic-cultural-studies.com/papers/06/potts-01.html>> [originally accessed 10 May 2008; second access 17 April 2013] (para. 11 of 27).

the opening stage of the narrative, and Sarah, Pat and Joseph are all assigned forenames, so there is more scope, through overt labelling and subliminal contextual references, for attribution of fatherhood there.

In conjunction with her single status as a mother, Sarah is heralded as ‘a great worker, tireless and strong’ (‘Sarah’, p. 48). Although she is not considered safe around the men in the village where ‘[w]omen with sons, and young brides, took care not to hire her’, those same women were often seen as those ‘kindest’ to her, defending her position to outsiders (‘Sarah’, p. 48). It is a strange benevolence directed towards her in these times, but it is in part because of recognition of her religious observations: she attended the Stations of the Cross, Holy Day activities and never missed Mass. Technically these attendances align her with the soothing effects of ritual and repetition, and traditional observances. In a telling statement the narrator suggests that ‘[t]here was a greater understanding in their hearts for sins against God than there was for sins against the Church’ (‘Sarah’, p. 48). This combination of secular restriction through the Constitution, allied with constraints imposed through religious doctrine, produces an interesting tension. It discriminates between the established powerhouses of the State and Church, whilst discretely acknowledging the elusive (and therefore perhaps ineffective) presence of God in terms of retribution for sins committed. Potts acknowledges this religious aspect of the narrative, expanding on the obvious Mary Magdalene identifiers in the character and notes ‘Sarah’s type of religious devotion is certainly much more matriarchal than patriarchal, and arguably more pagan than Christian’.<sup>53</sup> That is a valid reading in terms of the obvious allusions to pre-Christian fertility rites and observances, but it

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<sup>53</sup> Potts, ‘Reviving the Lass of Aughrim’, (para. 5 of 27).

also demonstrates the plurality of influences that Lavin places upon her characters. Potts usefully points out a long social history in support of her reading of ‘Sarah’ where ‘women are obligated to uphold virtue’; this works then as a metaphor for the times – a weight of expectation upon the female figure who cannot win.<sup>54</sup>

Faced with the anticipated establishment and public judgemental responses to literature in the 1940s Lavin never, interestingly, has her work banned. This continues to be the case throughout her professional life. By the late 1960s, Lavin claimed to be ‘bored to madness with this talk of censorship in Ireland’ but in the 1940s, as Lavin began her writing career, artists, writers and film makers faced the threat of their work being banned permanently in Ireland under censorship legislation.<sup>55</sup> By the *Sunday Press* interview in 1968, Lavin articulated concerns that moved beyond Ireland: ‘What we should be concerned about is censorship in its widest sense – in a world context. About things like are we getting the truth about Vietnam or Ecumenism’.<sup>56</sup> This outspokenness is noteworthy; a shift away from her usual more considered comments purely on the craft of writing. In a footnote to ‘Religious Conventions’ in *Mary Lavin: Quiet Rebel*, Kelly suggests that as Lavin’s ‘criticism is veiled in irony’ her writing was never banned by the Censorship Board.<sup>57</sup> In truth, irony alone cannot protect a writer from criticism surrounding the topics of their work, and Kelly does not make explicit the exact form of verbal or structural contrivance. However, Lavin’s measured nuances of disapproval can be seen to serve as some form of defence. The early versions of ‘Sarah’ bear this out.

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<sup>54</sup> Potts, ‘Reviving the Lass of Aughrim’, (para. 3 of 27).

<sup>55</sup> ‘The Quiet Authoress’, *The Sunday Press*, 21 April 1968, p. 20, unattributed: Colindale, British Library Newspapers.

<sup>56</sup> ‘The Quiet Authoress’, *The Sunday Press*, 21 April 1968, p. 20, unattributed: Colindale, British Library Newspapers.

<sup>57</sup> Kelly, *Mary Lavin*, p. 181, n. 4.

When the young wife Kathleen Kedrigan asks for Sarah's assistance in looking after the house whilst she is away in Dublin, a seemingly unstoppable sequence of events occurs. Simple domestic work is the catalyst for a tragic outcome. The wife in question is a newcomer to the village and is the opposite of Sarah in every way. She has a 'pale and papery face' and is described by other women as 'that bleached out doll' ('Sarah', pp. 49-50). These descriptors suggest absence of a life force: the metaphor of a child's toy both infantilises and is disempowering in connection with the adult figure of Kathleen. It also foreshadows a problematic childbirth. Her visit to Dublin to see a doctor is not received well by the local women – it is seen as a slight on the local practitioner, and redundant in their eyes, as she also seems destined for a troublesome pregnancy anyway. Sarah on the other hand has proved her fruitfulness and is pictured as full of life with 'warm colouring [and] gold eyes' ('Sarah', p. 50). Even these descriptions of her, allied to those of the husband Oliver Kedrigan, are contained within a pastoral semantic field. There are echoes of the orchard and ripened fruit about her. After Kathleen leaves Sarah and Oliver together they are both seen by neighbours illuminated in the sunlight working in symmetry. Identified as 'peasants', they appear as a celebration of all that is natural and healthy, in contrast to the relationship of opposites that is Oliver and his wife. Kathleen meanwhile is seen as 'anaemic and thin-boned' ('Sarah', p. 50). She is already identified as not being able to carry a healthy child.

Lavin's frank use of the image of the tin of sheep-raddle in 'Sarah' points to early personal confidence in her skills as a writer, which confirms Lord Dunsany's appraisal of her creative abilities. Sheep-raddle is a red paint used to mark sheep either in connection with their lambs, or as evidence of ownership by the farmer, or

to demonstrate that a ewe has been serviced by a ram. Just one hour after his wife has left for Dublin Oliver is getting ready to work with the sheep and is in his cart when he asks Sarah to pass him the tin of raddle. The paint resonates with obvious markers of fruitfulness and promise. It is a detail that is highly embedded within the consciousness of rural life, and places the narrative simultaneously within the pastoral and patriarchal domain. The immediacy with which Sarah and Oliver Kedrigan are at ease with one another is notable. He jokes and suggests that her facial ruddiness is due to the raddle itself. As a marker and identifier it signifies both the potential for fertility and the element of ownership. It is an obvious metaphor for the alleged events about to take place. Later, a similar interaction occurs between husband and wife where Sarah's death is revealed to Oliver but in a very different atmosphere. The possessive dominant patriarchal focus is evident then, as is the evident shrew-like pleasure Kathleen takes in revealing Sarah's demise. The reader should note that with Sarah, Oliver retains a sense of desire and power that is attractive, not destructive. In the later versions of 'Sarah', Oliver asks for wire cutters to be passed to him; in the earlier story it is the pigment. That does seem significant, as Oliver is actively placed as the suitor and Sarah as the object of desire within a pastoral domain previously. However, in those later versions the marriage relationship is viewed in more aggressive terms with the signifier of the wire cutters as an agent of separation.

Undeniably, this re-working of the narrative has caused some interpretative slippage, as can be seen in Melissa Kleindl's use of an anthologised version of 'Sarah' in *The Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories*.<sup>58</sup> Kleindl criticises Richard

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<sup>58</sup> Melissa K. Kleindl, 'Mary Lavin's "Sarah": Punishment for a Temptress or Victimization of an Unconventional Woman?' *Region, Nature, Frontiers: Proceedings from the 11<sup>th</sup> International Region*



Peterson for his confusion about the sheep-raddle and the wire cutters, yet Peterson is working from *Tales from Bective Bridge* (1942) in his appraisal of the early stories, and at no time then are wire cutters referred to in the narrative. The sheep-raddle is the primary marker: its presence and use distinguishes between the relationship that Oliver has with his wife and that with his lover. It connects both women to Oliver and highlights sexual connection and loss. Lavin creates a mood of potential between Oliver and Sarah in their opening exchange despite Sarah reddening ‘with capricious temper’, but this is quickly diffused with humour rather than anger as in the later version (‘Sarah’, p. 50). The structural continuity of the sheep-raddle engenders a more poignant outcome in the earlier version, where the connotations of the pigment are transferred to the wife. Yet there is no closure by the end of the narrative; Oliver Kedrigan’s shouts to his wife for the raddle can be read as unresolved emotional and sexual frustration. His wife’s inability to pass on the tin to him resonates as withdrawal on a number of levels. Lavin’s later introduction of the wire-cutters that Kleindl refers to is far less subtle but also does make its point. Undoubtedly, Lavin’s reworking of material has engendered some analytical confusion. At different stages throughout the critical history responding to Lavin’s short stories, similar assumptions have been made about which version is under review. Potts’ own reading of abuse in ‘Sarah’ also falls into this category. In order fully to engage with Lavin’s reworking of the texts, especially where she shifts from minor revision to major restructuring, critical integrity relies on interpretation grounded within transparent paradigms of publication. Clearly in this case, Lavin’s revisions altered potential reader sympathies.

Rather than depict the sexual act between Sarah and Oliver, Lavin's decision to insert a central ellipsis in the text forces a structural 'black hole' where the narrative withholds explicit sexual reference, in keeping with the climate of the time. In fact, there is no overt expression of sexual behaviour, merely flirting and innuendo until Oliver and Sarah's ease with one another (which could be seen as naive foreplay) is later tied to Sarah's pregnancy when it becomes noticeable. In the gentlest of ways the reader is led to believe that their time spent together was on the one hand a practical arrangement where the housework was completed, but also there was a sense of inevitability about the ensuing affair. The wife does return to a clean, well-ordered house. It is only some six months later that the brothers notice Sarah's altered state; when confronted, she walks from the house 'nonchalant and independent' and as she walks out we read 'her slow gait had a strange rhythmical grace' ('Sarah', p. 51). This movement foreshadows the descriptors of Honoria and Flora's mimicry in 'The Becker Wives', whilst this apparent physical confidence belies the onset of Sarah's destruction. Although Oliver's wife Kathleen Kedrigan is also pregnant at the same time, she is described as having bouts of hysteria, 'bloodless and self-conscious [as her] nerves were getting badly frayed' ('Sarah', p. 53). She offers us an alternative negative view of pregnancy. Although for her this was an inauspicious time to read a letter that accused her husband of infidelity, the reader has little sympathy in light of her deliberate cruelty towards Sarah. After Oliver's clumsy protests of denial and then cries of fear, her response is to take control, allegedly by burning the anonymous letter. However, a similar letter appears at Sarah's home the next day and that is when her brothers turn on her, banishing her from the family home. Sarah is left to support herself in any way she can. The eldest brother cannot reconcile her obvious pregnancy with the anticipated gossip of

the village and the censure of the local priest. He has no answers to give about the father and is also angered by the possible independence of his sister in writing the letter to Oliver Kedrigan. It appears that having broken the pattern of her previous silences Sarah is seen as a real threat to the continuance of the family unit, such as it is.

Although Oliver Kedrigan believes that his wife has burnt the letter, neither he nor the reader is absolutely sure. There is some doubt as he only sees a blank piece of paper burn. Given the logistics of writing another letter in so short a space of time, it makes more sense that Kathleen retains the letter and returns it to Sarah's brothers knowing that retribution will take place outside of her own home. However, that retribution is all-encompassing. Zack Bowen considers the actions of the betrayed wife to be sophisticated as she 'manages to control the situation and punish without doing anything that on the surface appears to be vindictive'.<sup>59</sup> In many respects she retains a Christian mantle – forgiving her husband without outwardly causing a scandal. However, her due diligence in alerting Sarah's brothers makes her culpable with regards to the death of Sarah and her child. Bowen refers to Sarah as a 'temptress who scandalizes the community by seducing men and having illegitimate children'.<sup>60</sup> He notes that while Lavin's authorial condemnation is absent in the narrative Sarah is eventually punished when cast out of the family home by her brothers, implying a righteous retribution in her death. Kleindl objects to Bowen's interpretation, and his particular use of semantics, and suggests Sarah would not be culpable, or acting as a temptress.<sup>61</sup> However, there is no evidence in the narrative

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<sup>59</sup> Zack Bowen, *Mary Lavin* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1975), p. 27.

<sup>60</sup> Bowen, *Mary Lavin*, p. 27.

<sup>61</sup> Kleindl, 'Mary Lavin's "Sarah"', p. 152.

that she was coerced or misled into the brief relationship, so it might easily be presumed she had ownership of, and responsibility for, her actions.

The casting out of Sarah does still suggest some censure, even outside of the narrative. Does the narrative endorse or indict this community's position? Or more tellingly, is it more an indictment of Ireland in the 1940s? The answers may be found in some significant textual detail. For instance, Lavin's descriptions of Sarah metaphorically echo those of the euphemistic identifier, the scarlet woman. The elder brother throws out her belongings, clothes and a few ornamental possessions such as a green box, a picture frame and a box of powder. Of the clothes, most obvious are a red dress and a red cap and a brown coat. In later versions revised by Lavin, 'a few bits of underwear [...] an alarm clock [...] a prayer book, a pair of high-heeled shoes' are added.<sup>62</sup> These alterations include more intimate clothing and these, alongside a box of powder, are value-laden: set against the neutral condition of an alarm clock and a picture frame they foreground Sarah's gender, and a particular codification of her belongings contributes to a growing sense of her marginalisation. The addition of a prayer book complicates matters; it makes clear Sarah's secure position as a church-goer more tenuous in that the casting out of the book suggests the possibility of her separation from the religious community. In the later versions, Pat, the elder brother, drags her by the hair across the floor in his attempt to banish her from the family home. She is also labelled by the stereotypical sexual identifiers of red clothing, underwear and high-heeled shoes. These would serve as the obvious branding of a prostitute elsewhere in literature and film, for instance, and the connections between sex and violence is uneasily made within the context of her

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<sup>62</sup> Mary Lavin, *The Stories of Mary Lavin*, Volume 2 (Constable: London, 1974), p. 21; *Tales from Bective Bridge* (Dublin: Town House, 1996), p. 50.

brother's disapproval. Regardless of interpretation, the tragedy of the narrative is that Sarah, well-liked and respected in many ways, is cast out and left to die. As Kathleen tells her husband, she is found 'as dead as a rat, and the child dead beside her!'<sup>63</sup> The simile is explicit and redundant: it excites anger and resentment in him. This is supposed to be our final proof of his guilt.

The conservative religious and secular focus in Ireland on the family as the nexus of social strength does translate to the territories of experience in Lavin's fiction. It maps onto Raymond Williams' analysis of the relationship between the individual and society. Constitutional restrictions evidently would have had an effect on patterns of behaviour between men and women, although Caitriona Clear's reappraisal of the difficulties experienced suggests we should not measure the expectations of the populace by present-day assumptions.<sup>64</sup> There is also the danger of passively accepting historically assimilated notions surrounding the full extent of government impact upon individuals.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, legislation introduced would suggest that by the 1930s in Ireland, opportunities for women were increasingly under threat and this impacted upon the economic decisions that people made. Myrtle Hill argues that 'women's role in the Free State was characterised as domestic and familial, with legislative measures progressively eroding their position in public life'.<sup>66</sup> Yet Caitriona Clear suggests issues surrounding 'citizenship and employment rights' for women were far more complex and less rigid than merely focusing on

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<sup>63</sup> Lavin, 'Sarah', p. 56.

<sup>64</sup> Caitriona Clear, 'Women in de Valera's Ireland 1932-48: A Reappraisal', *De Valera's Irelands*, ed. by Gabriel Doherty and Dermot Keogh (Cork: Mercier Press, 2003), pp. 104-114.

<sup>65</sup> In his essay former Irish Taoiseach Garrett Fitzgerald highlights Eamon de Valera's influence which still resonates within the Irish political system today: Garrett Fitzgerald, 'Eamon de Valera: The Price of His Achievement', *De Valera's Irelands*, ed. by Gabriel Doherty & Dermot Keogh (Cork: Mercier Press, 2003), pp. 185-204.

<sup>66</sup> Myrtle Hill, *Women in Ireland A Century of Change* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 2003), p. 100.

‘paid work and public life’.<sup>67</sup> Although in 1933 it became law for national schoolteachers to resign upon marriage, and the 1935 Employment Act extended the bar to all civil service posts, Clear argues that in practice, women were not barred from every type of work outside the home, and had access to education and to political office.<sup>68</sup> However, it is difficult to come to terms with these aspirations to political office when, as Hill points out, a Bill in 1927 had already excluded women from jury service ‘in the interests of administrative efficiency and financial savings’.<sup>69</sup> Interpretation of the inevitable tensions surrounding the success or failure of this legislation is complex and varied. Our desire as readers to see change as necessary and plausible at specific points in narratives is one marred or blessed with historical and social hindsight. Gillian Beer cautions us about the imposition of present-day expectations of ‘relevance’ that we place on texts. She argues that there is a ‘need to recognise the *difference* of past writing and past concerns instead of converting them into our current categories’.<sup>70</sup> Although this could suggest that texts inhabit an historical space which cannot allow for later translation or appropriation, it also offers a useful insight into the dangers of mechanistic decoding of past texts.

Nevertheless, how Lavin’s fictions engage with issues surrounding women’s economic choices is just as nuanced and varied as this historical analysis has proved. Where the family is the core unit, for instance in ‘Lilacs’ (*Tales from Bective Bridge*), the fiction disarmingly brings into play interaction between its members as

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<sup>67</sup> Caitriona Clear, *Women of the House: Women’s Household Work in Ireland 1926-1961 Discourses, Experiences, Memories* (Dublin and Portland, USA: Irish Academic Press, 2000), pp. 5-8.

<sup>68</sup> Clear, *Women of the House*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>69</sup> Hill, *Women in Ireland*, p. 100.

<sup>70</sup> Gillian Beer, ‘Representing Women: Re-presenting the Past’, *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, ed. by Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 63-80 (p. 63).

the primary focus.<sup>71</sup> This deflects the core social critique onto them and reinforces the inextricable link between the private and the public - the assumption being that whatever hierarchies, obstructions and crises exist internally, they are a microcosm of a much wider social environment. In 'Lilacs', the Molloy family earn their living by the purchase and selling on of manure; their situation represents the relentless drudgery and economic fragility of rural life. 'Lilacs' also offers a more sophisticated realist expression of an Ireland that George Moore had given much earlier in his collection *The Untilled Field*. Yet, paradoxically, it returns to the same fundamental problems. Clear's study of women's household work in Ireland is worthy of note here. It brings to our attention practical difficulties experienced in rural areas, for instance, in the 1930s that are highlighted within 'Lilacs':

A dungheap some distance from the house, would be the final destination of the contents of pots and commodes in rural areas. There was never a smell off the dungheap until the day it was moved, to be spread. Then all the windows would have to be shut.<sup>72</sup>

This connection perhaps dates Lavin's narrative somewhat for the modern reader inexperienced in the reality of such domestic routines. In 'Lilacs', the manure business is a public concern, and an economic priority, thereby linking the family to modern education and recreational activity through the profits made. In Moore's 'The Exile', for instance, the family farm is the foundation upon which future decisions such as marriage are made.<sup>73</sup> Significantly, in 'Lilacs' the financial gains of dealing in the waste product are weighted variably: as payment for boarding

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<sup>71</sup> Mary Lavin, 'Lilacs', *Tales from Bective Bridge* [1942] (London: Michael Joseph, 1945).

<sup>72</sup> Clear, *Women of the House*, p. 145.

<sup>73</sup> George Moore, 'The Exile', *The Untilled Field* [1903; 1926; 1931] (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Ltd, 2000).

school educations and music lessons for the daughters, as a mechanism for both social interaction with and exclusion from the community, and as a dividing element between family members.

Sisters Kate and Stacey have grown up hating the smell surrounding the business, resenting the encroachment upon their lives of the farmers who bring their rotting dung to the house. They do not see the financial advantages of the business. Ironically, throughout the story, the smell of the dung (a fertiliser to enhance growth) drains rather than nourishes the family psyche. Phelim's decision as patriarch to maintain trading despite objections from all the women in the house is the first marker of division, but a necessary economic decision. Lavin highlights the repetitive nature of the day-to-day routines in detail: the sound of horses' hooves on the cobbles delivering the dung, the sweeping of the yard, the preparation of tea. The routines are presented as a constant, just as the business is. When one of the daughters overhears newcomers to the area complaining about the smell, it signifies an intrusion into the unbroken pattern of rural living. This is an early indicator in the narrative that Lavin empathises with the harsh nature of country life.

When both parents eventually die, the reader is almost ready to accept that the dung heap will be replaced by flowering lilac trees. This is something the youngest daughter Stacey had planned for a long time as she was so affected by the smell of the dung. We learn also that despite her own dislike of the manure, Phelim's wife Rose had continued the trade after her husband's sudden death. At this juncture, although it is not immediately obvious, Lavin has constructed a divided inheritance that connects mother and daughters in two intricately different ways, and eventually divides the sisters. Significantly, the mother herself had also longed to



blot out the smell of the dung when her young husband-to-be proposed his business plan: for her the solution was to be rockets and mignonette; later, for her younger daughter Stacey it was to be lilacs. In reality, the only time that the smell of manure was dampened in the house was on the day of Phelim's funeral – then the deep perfume of lilies overpowered everything. Kate, the eldest daughter, is more like her mother in practical ways; she also continues the trade after Rose's death, building on the inheritance with a view to making enough money to escape the family home through marriage. Stacey is left at the closure of the narrative uncomprehendingly still insistent on replacing the dung heap with flowering shrubs and trees. The sisters Kate and Stacey, pragmatist and romantic, who worked together against their parents when they were alive, are divided once alone. Lavin does not flinch from delivering the almost painful realisation of what it takes to survive. 'Lilacs' is an example of where the dysfunctional realities of the old order strain against Lavin's portrayals of the new.

Lavin was not alone in her critique of Irish life. The finely balanced ideal of a relationship between individual and society in this complex climate of orthodoxy, particularly when focused on women's rights in connection with the Constitution, was challenged on many levels. Clair Wills' account of the tension between State ideology and cultural practice points to the fact that both government and writers actually shared a sense of the value of ordinary lives, despite there being a conflict between State construction of femininity 'as both sexually innocent and safely domestic' and the various plays, novels and short stories contesting this ideology.<sup>74</sup> The examples Wills cites, including Margaret Barrington's 'Village Without Men'

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<sup>74</sup> Clair Wills, 'Women Writers and the Death of Rural Ireland', *Éire-Ireland*, 41:1 & 2 (Spring-Summer 2006), 192-212 (p. 193).

(1944), either overtly celebrate women's sexuality and independence or undermine images of controlled femininity through distorting tales of 'sexual corruption' and brutality.<sup>75</sup> Realist texts such as 'The Great Hunger' (1942) are explicitly condemnatory about the decline of rural life and the limited options available to men and women. At the same time what Wills marks as 'state propaganda' also had its own agenda prioritising the lives of ordinary men and women as being positive barometers of the identity of neutral Ireland.<sup>76</sup> This strategy aimed to counteract any negative commentary. Wills further notes that whilst many liberal realist writers availed themselves of the opportunity to be critical of the government 'provincial discourse' many, including Sean O'Faolain, broadly supported government policy, so there was a difference between their creative and journalistic writing.<sup>77</sup> Lavin is set apart from writers such as O'Faolain, or indeed Maura Laverty, in terms of her complete focus on the short story as a medium in which to explore these social tensions.

Lavin's narratives offer a subtle approach to the tensions surrounding social decay. The somewhat modest nature of her critique belies deep concerns about rural and small-town living. Lavin is not only condemnatory of a certain type of rural life: she foregrounds bleakness, the harshness of poverty and isolation experienced, but undeniably also celebrates or lends value to that very same existence. Lavin also subverts the ideology of the safety of the home and the protective patriarchal figurehead, particularly in a short story such as 'Assigh', which suggests that the restrictions and pressures placed upon women and men were of deep concern to

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<sup>75</sup> Margaret Barrington, 'Village Without Men', *David's Daughter Tamar* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1982); Wills, 'Women Writers', p. 193.

<sup>76</sup> Wills, 'Women Writers', p. 195.

<sup>77</sup> Wills, 'Women Writers', p. 199.

her.<sup>78</sup> The assumed privilege afforded to the patriarch of a household determines the plot of 'Assigh'. In the opening stage of the short story, a father briefly revisits an episode twenty years earlier when he had lashed out at his daughter and crippled her with his belt. At this point in time, a few days before his death, his anger is not directed towards himself, as he felt the punishment was justified; any sense of remorse is acutely directed towards the outcome of the beating, his daughter's disability, not the beating itself. His daughter and his son have always lived in fear of his temper, and the control that he has over their lives prevents the daughter from marrying and leaving the farm, and the son from having children of his own. It is only the death of the patriarch that will release both of them, but even that comes too late for either to make up for time passed. There is a certain inevitability surrounding the complicated territories of family duty and rightful inheritance. Lavin does not reject the bonds of family life and patterns of social legacy; rather she interrogates the pressures that are put upon rural communities to survive by any means. Lavin offers a measured account of the Ireland of her day, with issues of bloodlines and inheritance marking acknowledgement of certain truths of her culture. That inflects her realism.

Does she stop short of what Wills calls a 'bitter realism' of women's lives which engendered the banning of a text such as Maura Laverty's novel *Alone We Embark* (1943) for instance?<sup>79</sup> There the plot centres on the romantic involvements of a young woman, her early widowhood, a lost love and a sacrificial marriage to an old man in the hopes of supporting her mother. The practicality of survival is brought to the fore when her first true love returns from America and it is only at the

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<sup>78</sup> Mary Lavin, 'Assigh', *Selected Stories* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1959).

<sup>79</sup> Wills, 'Women Writers', p. 208.

end of the novel that redemption of sorts from the unrelenting misery of her life comes in the form of an opportunistic fatal car crash killing her brutal husband. As Wills notes, it is not a novel which openly castigates the government's rural policies; rather it illustrates a cohesive support and understanding of shortages of essential domestic supplies under wartime restrictions. In fact, Lavery's own move towards non-fiction in her cookery books and pamphlets serves as propaganda to mediate public concerns about shortages. It is the desire to rid oneself of a pragmatic marriage as a means of survival, and return to one's first love that appears to cause offence. If Lavin does fall short of 'bitter realism', subsequently avoiding censure, it is cleverly managed, for narratives as explicitly revealing as 'Sarah' would have disrupted the censorship board's sense of security.

De Valera's often quoted St Patrick's Day speech of 1943 clearly proposes a national romanticised ideal and assumes prior national agreement, although the stable family life imagined was not borne of his experience. The paternalistic management appears as what Clear recognises was a 'strong anti-feminist tendency in government', as if there was 'a feminism to be against'.<sup>80</sup> The Constitution supported a national idealisation of family, marriage and motherhood whether that was a reality or not. Clear evaluates that climate in her study *Women of the House* and seeks to illustrate important resistances and successes amongst women, taking into account those complex and diverse responses to conditions in Ireland. *Women of the House* enhances our understanding of conditions Lavin responds to in her finely layered fictions, and is worthy of note here.

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<sup>80</sup> Clear, 'Women in de Valera's Ireland', p. 105.

‘At Sallygap’, an important short story in *Tales from Bective Bridge*, interrogates this notion of idealised family living. This collection, as Richard Peterson reminds us in his study of Lavin, offers a ‘portrait of an Irish middle class peopled by lonely, sometimes bitter characters trapped by their own natures and their frustrated emotional needs’.<sup>81</sup> There is more to it than that, however: close reading of the text suggests maybe that the responsibility for such damaged and fragile lives cannot be laid wholly in the hands of the middle and working class. They are the victims of inequities forced upon rural and small-town populations during the 1930s and 1940s in Ireland. As Robert Caswell notes, *Tales from Bective Bridge* was published in the same year as the censorship debate about Eric Cross’s *The Tailor and Ansty*, and ‘At Sallygap’ had appeared earlier in an American magazine.<sup>82</sup> There was an air of rebellion also amongst writers as Wills reminds us, which Lavin appears to have been party to in her early work, although, as she writes deftly and with subtlety, she remains apart from controversy. Her characters do emerge from dull and uneventful lives to consider, sometimes even attempt, significant changes. Despite the narrative commitment to change however, more often than not things remain the same as cultural, social, religious and political pressures come to bear. Success is not always the issue; the improbable fairy tale ending is not part of Lavin’s milieu. One could argue that neither is the notion of romance, yet elements greater than the heroic are there in the difficulties of the small town inhabitant. There are close connections to the work of the novelist Kate O’Brien and her ‘fusion

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<sup>81</sup> Peterson, *Mary Lavin*, p. 25.

<sup>82</sup> Robert Caswell, ‘Irish Political Reality and Mary Lavin’s *Tales from Bective Bridge*’, *Éire-Ireland*, 3:1 (Spring 1968), 48-60 (p. 50). ‘At Sallygap’, *Atlantic Monthly*, 168 (October 1941), 464-476; cited in Kosok, ‘Mary Lavin: A Bibliography’, p. 281.

of the conventions of romance and realism'.<sup>83</sup> Anne Fogarty identifies a key element in O'Brien's work which resonates with Lavin's, in that '[t]he familism of her novels acts as a commentary on the closed and hierarchical nature of Irish society in the initial decades of the Free State'.<sup>84</sup> Lavin's commentary may be contained within the generic strictures of the short story format but it offers no less intensity of observation.

'At Sallygap' is a case in point. It suggests authenticity of experience, set around the life of Manny Ryan, a Dublin shopkeeper in a loveless marriage who once had expectations of travel, a musical career and a new life in Paris. The primary setting is Dublin with the immediacy of the Dublin Mountains from the outset (where he has gone to purchase a supply of fresh eggs for his shop), and the distant alienated view of the city where he lives and works. These tangible locations legitimise a realist reading: they offer a geographical and objective convergent point of consensus. There are three versions of Manny dealt with throughout the narrative: the brave young Manny of the past, full of hope and eager to travel; the timid and subservient Manny of the present and a child-like innocent Manny who emerges briefly in the Dublin Mountains but is subdued the closer he gets to the city and his wife. The narrative opens with specific topographical references to locate the reader firmly in the rural domain. The bus is moving towards the town of Enniskerry, County Wicklow, and in the distance the late afternoon mail boat is identified as having left Dun Laoghaire harbour on its way to England. These living landscapes of town and country are typical examples of what will emerge in Lavin's stories as

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<sup>83</sup> Anne Fogarty, 'The Business of Attachment: Romance and Desire in the Novels of Kate O'Brien', *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays On Kate O'Brien*, ed. by Eibhear Walshe (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993), pp. 101-119 (p. 104).

<sup>84</sup> Fogarty, 'The Business', p. 103.

familiar locales. They serve to highlight the tension between urban and rural economic opportunity which is always present in Lavin's narratives. A sense of alienation and disconnection from the familiar is in place immediately. As the bus Manny travels in gains height in the mountains, Dublin is 'exposed', reduced to the 'indistinct' whilst at the same time designated as 'city'.<sup>85</sup> It is neither elevated nor praised, as would befit the capital of a country; rather the language of exposure is problematic in that it suggests suppressed deviances where man-made constructions are indistinguishable from the unruliness of the natural world. The spires and steeples usually associated with church buildings 'looked little better than dark thistles rising up defiantly in the gentle pasture' ('At Sallygap', p. 78). This is a language of religious and secular tension, urban and rural landscape. It supports both a contemporary decoding of Lavin's priorities, couched within a perceived gulf between locations, and an understanding of historical context which Gillian Beer foregrounds.<sup>86</sup>

Manny enters into conversation with a young man and before long, bolstered by an apparent respect shown to him, he talks expansively about his lost opportunity to travel to Paris, or 'gay Paree, as they call it over there' ('At Sallygap', p. 79). He falls into the stereotypical referencing of a city that he has never visited but, like many armchair travellers, had constructed his knowledge of Paris from postcards and a lot of talk with friends. The reader discovers from his conversation and the reclaiming of images in an old photograph, that Manny had had the opportunity to travel with a musical ensemble, The Mary Street Band. He had been playing with them for three years when they all decided to leave Dublin and the rough dance clubs

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<sup>85</sup> Mary Lavin, 'At Sallygap', *Tales from Bective Bridge*, [1942] (London: Michael Joseph, 1945), p. 78. All further references are to this edition, and are given in the text.

<sup>86</sup> Beer, 'Representing Women', p. 63.

and try something new. Revealingly, Manny remembers that they travelled in search of respect. In Dublin they had been heckled by audiences and spat at, and one night a dead cat was thrown up on stage at them. Manny creates an idealised vision of Paris for the reader and his travelling companion – the streets swimming in wine which friendly publicans had used to clean the paths, singing at all hours – but it is difficult to know if this is the constant dream vision constructed with his friends or one that has become even more softened as he has aged. He encourages the young man to travel while he can, even though he himself has been no further than Dublin. The reason he never got as far as Paris, he tells his companion, is because he felt bad about leaving his girlfriend, Annie. As he was about to set sail, his thoughts travelled over his time with her; this freedom of thought ironically is the agency of his own restriction. He makes coy euphemistic references to ‘all the things we’d done together’; he is keen to assure him that ‘[t]here was nothing bad, you know, nothing to be ashamed of, if you understand’ but a relationship is prioritised and Lavin constructs an inevitable life of entrapment within it (‘At Sallygap’, p. 82).

There are echoes here of Joyce’s ‘Eveline’ and Lavin may well be revisiting the story as a marker in the lineage of emigration narratives. There, the eponymous protagonist also experiences a longing to travel. Her predicament is the burden of responsibility placed upon her to care for her bullying drunkard of a father; entrapment comes in the form of social expectations for women to remain within the domestic sphere whatever the provocation. Unlike Manny, who initially presents as in control when planning his journey (bearing in mind this is relayed to us as a retrospective narrative), Eveline is evidently driven to escape. At the conclusion, she is caught like an animal in the headlights: ‘helpless’, she is dehumanised, losing her



flight or fight response faculties.<sup>87</sup> We never know how her life continues. With Manny, the reality of remaining in Ireland is clear as the narrative continues. His potential experience contracts into marriage and Dublin life. There is no space for dreams. As events at the dockside unfold, they capture the intensity of restriction that Lavin plays out in other short stories.

His life story hinges around this thwarted emigration episode. He is moved by Annie's isolation on the dock in the rain and in an effort to have a few last words with her he leaves the boat and misses his passage to France. As with Eveline, there is an evident realisation of a sexual and social dilemma. However, with Manny his action, rather than inaction, is the determining feature. It is not explicit that he is intending to stay, but he does bring his bag back down with him although he forgets his fiddle. It is evident that he is torn about the journey and his separated belongings act as metaphorical signposts. As soon as they meet, the ever-practical Annie sounds stronger than the lonely dockside 'widow' portrayed. The reader almost hears her gloating as she says 'I knew you'd come to your senses' ('At Sallygap', p. 83). In what could be described as a farcical musical hall sketch, his friends, other passengers and the crowd on the dock enter into a futile miscommunication as they attempt to retrieve and return the forgotten fiddle. Someone mimes the playing of a fiddle, others mouth lost words and in the end it is thrown from the boat and, despite all efforts, smashed against an iron boat tie on the dockside. The broken fiddle signifies the ending of his career in music, and Annie's mastery over him. The immediacy of the writing is astonishing: the reader is transported from the bus in the

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<sup>87</sup> James Joyce, 'Eveline', *Dubliners* [1914] (London: Triad Paladin, 1988), p. 43.

Dublin Mountains to the noisy docks in an instant and it is with some effort that you return to the conversation on the bus.

Once they reach Sallygap, Manny conducts business with a farmer to arrange supply of fresh eggs to his shop. Interestingly, when asked by the farmer if he would like to supplement the order with some chickens or geese, Manny is incapable of making a decision as his wife is the primary business manager. The effort he has put into this scheme tells us something about the level of poverty that his life has sunk to. Exhaustion and life weariness has made him querulous and desperate. In talking about the shop there is almost a feverish intensity when he says ‘Look at me! I’ve been out since early morning trying to get to hear of someone that would deliver eggs to the door’ (‘At Sallygap, p. 85). Still, once business has been agreed he is free to please himself. As he walks along the road he contemplates the natural world, and gradually opens his own horizons again as he talks himself into a trip to Paris to visit his friends. The omniscient narrator intrudes here:

Then, as if aghast at the grandeur of his revolt, Manny gave himself an alternative. He should go over to Liverpool, anyway, for one of the week-end race-meetings. With a bit of luck he might make his expenses, and that would shut Annie’s mouth. (‘At Sallygap’, p. 87)

The narrative slips into free indirect discourse, revealing a genuine sense of anger and frustration amidst the soothing calm of the countryside. The release that Manny experiences always seems impermanent and his expectations decrease as he moves intellectually from European to English destination, the exotic to the mundane.

Manny is one of many failed husbands in Lavin's narratives, which often depict marriages dominated by bitter and frustrated women. His presence here in the first published collection foreshadows later characters such as Robert in 'A Happy Death'.<sup>88</sup> Manny's thoughts, however limited, give him new confidence as he enters a public house to wait for the bus back. He has begun to enjoy his own company and revels in the independence of observing other travellers waiting for the bus and locals without joining in their conversation. He maintains this independence by choosing to walk back into town and get a tram but as he is drawn back into the city the normal concerns and restrictions of his life start to weigh him down. In the countryside he had elevated his sights, been drawn to the Romantic notion of nurturing the soul, felt sadness and joy all at once in an echo of the Romantic poets. He sees clearly the beauty of the night sky and is uplifted yet scared by the enormity of his emotions:

[H]aving no thought to meet and stem the tide of desolating joy that began to swell so suddenly within him, he ran down the road the way he used to run on the roads as a young lad, and as he ran he laughed out loud to think that he, Manny Ryan, was running along a country road in the dark. ('At Sallygap', p. 89)

Depressingly, the reality of his marriage catches up with him. He has every right to fear the sharpness of his wife's voice and the 'whipping tongue' but, surprisingly, the perspective of the narrative alters and when Annie is brought sharply into focus, this engenders a brief unexpected sympathy towards her ('At Sallygap', p. 91). It is a sympathy that is difficult to rationalise as she is portrayed as a victim and gaoler at the same time. Her life is one of drudgery, as is Manny's, but also one of security.

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<sup>88</sup> Mary Lavin, 'A Happy Death', *The Becker Wives and Other Stories* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd, 1946).

Manny is a decent man; he does not beat her but he is too passive and lacklustre for her. Lavin has created a fiery potent woman in Annie who has to live vicariously through the anguished narratives of others in order to imagine violence, a violence it is implied that she seeks. It could be argued that a real-life Heathcliff would inspire her passions. Manny's late arrival home has brought her closer than ever before to the terrors of domestic uncertainty. She imagines that he has left her, even that he has died and she is now a widow. This is not a satisfactory conclusion to her imaginings however, so she focuses on his return and a sense of 'reality [coming] into their relations' if he brutalises her. It is telling that 'She waited for his coming with more eagerness than when he was coming to court her' ('At Sallygap', p. 95). The dysfunctional nature of an enforced matrimonial state is resolutely charted by Lavin. What Annie gets is not a brutal drunken monster returning whom she could brandish in front of other women as an example of hardship, but a timid tired man who, having lost the sanctuary of the countryside, is a prisoner in his own marriage.

Giovanna Tallone's reading of 'At Sallygap', in conjunction with Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's 'At Sally Gap', rightly highlights 'great loneliness' in the narrative.<sup>89</sup> This is one of Lavin's focus points – understanding and articulating the limitations of human relationships. Tallone cites Kelly's study of Lavin which elsewhere offers a useful natural analogy – the relationship between the conceptual notions of belief and trust and the 'unseen portion of the iceberg'.<sup>90</sup> Kelly reminds us that 'Mary Lavin often writes at two levels of significance, one exterior and one obvious', providing a tension between the abstract and the concrete.<sup>91</sup> Kelly also stresses that 'Manny and

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<sup>89</sup> Giovanna Tallone, 'Elsewhere is a Negative Mirror: The "Sally Gap" Stories of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Mary Lavin', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 10: 1-2, (2004), 203-215 (p. 213).

<sup>90</sup> Kelly, *Mary Lavin*, p. 134.

<sup>91</sup> Kelly, *Mary Lavin*, p. 24.

Annie hope for different things from life, so their sense of reality differs'.<sup>92</sup> This would seem to resist all that realist fiction presupposes, and reject the practice of consensus that Ermarth feels is so important. However, Lavin's fiction does inscribe in itself an essential part of the human condition: that a complex mix of individual perspectives can learn to live with one another. That is an authentic realist depiction. The references to nostalgic escapism present in Lavin's short stories (Annie's dark daydreams, Manny's rose-tinted memories), coexist with expressions of the realist mode. This results in presentation of judiciously selected material to create the illusion of representing the real world as a reader might understand it. Lavin's fictions persuasively offer the very ordinariness of life's stages punctured by high and low moments. Such resistance to change as a form of escapism from the insecurities and failures of the present is also played out in 'The Long Ago'.

The title story of *The Long Ago and Other Stories* (1944) is a frustrating exploration of the stultifying obsession of a spinster who cannot face the reality of her life.<sup>93</sup> Buoyed up by the well-meaning, yet equally blinkered friendships of her youth, Hallie, the main protagonist, is the only unmarried one of a group of three friends: Dolly Frewen, Ella White and herself. Lavin creates a friendship triangle that is strained at various points over the years by the difference in each woman's life. What Hallie does not recognise is 'that there was a difference between a married woman and a spinster, and that even a widow is not the same as a woman who had never had a man in the house' ('The Long Ago', p. 149). This declaration, not uttered out loud but played out in the imagination of Dolly, underpins a great many of the religious and cultural assumptions about women and their roles at the

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<sup>92</sup> Kelly, *Mary Lavin*, p. 133.

<sup>93</sup> Mary Lavin, 'The Long Ago', *The Long Ago and Other Stories* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd, 1944). All further references are to this edition, and are given in the text.

time, especially those resonating from Eamon de Valera's 'The Ireland That We Dreamed Of' speech.<sup>94</sup> Lavin pushes against its presumptions in a story such as 'Sarah', whilst at the same time undercutting the pastoral rhetoric in the damning closure of her narrative. The construction of femininity as ambiguously innocent and yet knowing, capable of socially conventional fertility within a marriage and so emerging from a patriarchal discourse of domesticity, is interesting when related to the realism portrayed in Lavin's fictional world. Within 'The Long Ago', marriages are seen as sites of fertile productivity and the status of an unmarried older woman is that of outsider, with pejorative terms such as 'old maid' applied to denote barrenness of emotional and physical capability. Despite Kelly's defence of the later 1974 version of the story as a more truthful rendition of focus on Hallie as spinster, there is a stronger and more powerful disruption in this earlier draft between the status of Hallie as dreamer and single woman.<sup>95</sup> Any perceived threat to the institution of marriage by a single woman is offset by her inability to move beyond the 'misty dreamy land' of the past; her manifestations of the fantasy relationship between herself and her sweetheart are nothing more than the ramblings of an unfulfilled individual ('The Long Ago', p. 150).

Hallie's surname is never disclosed: as a narrative construction this isolates her within the evolving landscape of births, marriages and deaths. Dolly marries Sam Feeney, Ella marries Oliver Fallon and Hallie remains unchanged as her early tentative, embryonic romance with Dominic Sinnot is never fully realised. He marries Blossom, the daughter of the local solicitor, Jasper Kane. Both Ella and Dolly have children, but Hallie never does and is unrealistic in her demands for the

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<sup>94</sup> Eamon de Valera, 'The Ireland That We Dreamed Of', *Speeches and Statements by Eamon de Valera, 1917-1993*, ed. by Maurice Moynihan (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1980), pp. 466-469.

<sup>95</sup> Kelly, *Mary Lavin*, p. 151.

attention of her old friends over the years. Even within the short list of key protagonists given, it is obvious that Hallie remains on the fringes of emotional and physical development, and this is a key determinant in her reliability as a genuine friend. Hallie is the constant, but in a negatively familiar and unchanging way. The reality of the demands of marriage and motherhood in actual fact bring Dolly and Ella closer together, with widowhood as the final arbiter of closeness amongst friends.

The voice of the omniscient narrator often blurs with that of the consciousness of Hallie as in the beginning, where we learn that Dominie's preferred course of action to marry Blossom instead of Hallie is supposedly down to practical measures:

He had been young and innocent, and he had not realised that an elderly man will hardly make an offer of a partnership to a penniless young solicitor unless there is more behind the offer than met the eye at the first glance.

('The Long Ago', p. 142)

The implication here is that he was offering to take the young woman in exchange for a permanent position in the firm. This pecuniary investment creates an exchange between father, and prospective son-in-law, that Hallie and the narrator perceive as an inevitable course of action in light of the inexperienced nature of her sweetheart. Lavin complicates Dominie's supposed artlessness in two ways: the first in that Dominie is destined to live only a short while, and Blossom will remarry. The prosperity promised so inelegantly in Hallie's eyes to Dominie is denied him by the narrative. The second is that the reader has only a flawed perspective on events; whether Hallie's feelings were genuine or an immature infatuation or whether

Dominie truly loved Blossom cannot be determined. What does emerge is a disturbing portrait of a lonely woman who elevates herself above the position of the genuine widow and seeks to join her sweetheart even beyond the grave. Hallie claims to have had a dream in which Dominie comes to her; she interprets that as being a sign to visit his grave:

And so she did. Every evening she slipped up to the cemetery [...] they were the happiest moments of the day. But even these moments had been spoiled, because nine evenings out of ten Blossom appeared in her widow's weeds, and Hallie had to get up and move away. ('The Long Ago', p. 143)

Lavin engenders resentment towards Blossom which is undercut by the actuality of a consistent visiting pattern by a genuinely grieving widow. The legitimacy of Blossom's marriage supersedes any prior claims by the single Hallie. Even Dolly finds herself getting frustrated by her behaviour, vacillating between admiration as '[s]he had been prettier than any of them, and had a sweeter disposition even than Ella' and yet using the identifiers 'old maid' and 'spinster' when Hallie responds jealously about what she sees as limited time spent with her old friends ('The Long Ago', p. 149). Hallie's continual denial of the practicalities of her friends' lives is reductive, alienating her from the limited network of friends that she has. By the conclusion of the narrative, at the death of Oliver Fallon, the reader can clearly see that Hallie is alone; the 'worn wedding rings' that her two friends wear act as signifiers of reality and of an experience that she cannot comprehend ('The Long Ago', p. 162). The story is a useful reflection on the dangers of submerging oneself too far into the past and failing to move forward. More specifically, there is a special focus on women; their ageing and subsequent marginalisation is seen as an index of



wider social mutability. This shift from stability to collapse is an underlying feature of key 1940s texts such as ‘Miss Holland’, ‘A Happy Death’ and ‘The Becker Wives’.

‘The Cemetery in the Demesne’ suggests similar concerns but has a more intricate frame of reference. Lavin’s fiction draws attention to the remnants of an old country estate, ‘a gentleman’s demesne’, connecting poverty, tragedy and death most explicitly to the decayed grandeur of an ascendancy history through its landscape, not its architecture.<sup>96</sup> This is a deflected Big House narrative only in that it reminds the reader of the permanent echoes of the past surrounding the present. More interestingly, the unnamed main protagonist is the locus to explore a gulf between the social and private lives that individuals lead; this is done through the construction of a non-delineable travel narrative. The reader recognises both the journey’s length, delivering gravel to ‘the other end of the county’, and relative specifics of ‘miles of flat Midland country’ to be traversed (‘The Cemetery’, pp. 40, 41). This is Lavin’s heartland. ‘The Cemetery in the Demesne’ also consciously articulates contemporary expectations surrounding the roles for men and women: these are defined in terms of the domestic interior and the external public workplace. The private lives of a husband and wife are brought sharply to our attention; a basically sound relationship is disrupted and damaged by another family member in conjunction with events beyond the household. Lavin creates some distance between reader and characters, identifying the characters initially through occupation: the carter, the garage proprietor, the mechanics, the wife, the sister-in-law, the district nurse, the doctor, the priest, the mother. These generic labels serve to create an

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<sup>96</sup> Mary Lavin, ‘The Cemetery in the Demesne’, *The Long Ago and Other Stories* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd, 1944), p. 43. All further references are to this edition, and are given in the text.

everyman or everywoman who could be similarly affected. The only named character is Sissie, the carter's sister-in-law, and she is a vindictive, ungrateful woman who poisons the mind of the carter's wife and can clearly be seen as a destructive force in the household. This story is one of many by Lavin which deal with the theme of death and is extraordinarily moving in its treatment of the fragility of individual happiness.

The carter is a man with a generous and outgoing nature. He loves to talk to people and his job, delivering large loads of gravel across the country, often leaves him isolated. Often his wife and sister-in-law barely tolerate his conversations, despite his wife's underlying keenness to hear what goes on outside the house. Sissie appears to have eroded any confidence in his wife's ability to enjoy his work stories. On this occasion he has orders to transport a large load of gravel to a cemetery. His work orders require interpretation as the foreman has written additional information on them 'with a short stub of pencil that wrote indistinctly'; the graveyard was inside the confines of a big country estate ('The Cemetery', p. 41). This instability in the graphology foreshadows the emotional and practical difficulties of the day ahead, as if the inscription that could so easily be erased in some way is connected to the stability of the carter's life as he sees it.

Along the way, when he does break the long journey to check on the truck, he passes the time of day with a garage man and the conversation leaves him feeling invigorated. The carter's thoughts are then played out through omniscient narration as he continues on his way: 'There was nothing like a bit of company. There was nothing like passing the time of day with another human being' ('The Cemetery', p. 43). His obvious delight in, and engagement with, the politeness conventions of

conversation foregrounds his usual isolation early on in the narrative, partly in order to establish some empathy with this everyman figure and also to negotiate a route towards his eventual decline. The travel metaphor runs throughout the story, as each step that the carter makes brings him closer to a point of separation from his old self. At the point of delivery, the carter comes into contact with a woman and her sick child who live in the lodge as he enters the estate. As with the other characters, the child is depersonalised, reified as 'it' and 'a child no bigger than a cabbage' ('The Cemetery', p. 44). The implication of lack of brain activity is supported by references to a floppy head, weak neck, quiet demeanour and underweight physique. The nurse had said there was no hope for him, the mother reports. Yet, there is an undeniable love and pride expressed by her as she valiantly tries to talk about the child to the carter. The child's fragility is reinforced by references to the topography of the house, the dampness surrounding it and its proximity to a water-logged cemetery populated by rats, and by a mother who describes him as 'a little angel' ('The Cemetery', p. 47). These points are not laboured (although they are easily noted), but the mood of the carter alters in this environment, and eventually, in response to her continued concerns about the child, he attempts to prevent her from asking for a gospel to be read over the child as it equates to the last rites. It is only given at a point when life is ebbing away. The resistance of the woman in insisting that this be done prompts him to offer some encouragement as to the hopeful outcome of such a blessing, but he also cautions that to meddle with fate may bring even greater disasters on a wider network associated with the child. Lavin appears to be constructing a resistance to Catholic doctrine here. The carter offers clear boundaries regarding belief:

“Oh, prayer is all right [...] I have nothing against prayer. I never go to bed myself without kneeling down for five minutes beside my bed, if it’s only counting the flies on the wall I am, but I don’t care to have anything to do with relics and gospels. Relics and gospels are unnatural, that’s the way I look on it. I’m a great believer in Nature. Trust in Nature I always say, and she won’t fail you”. (‘The Cemetery’, p. 56)

This reads more as a pre-Christian doctrine than contemporary Catholicism; he later refers to the knowledge of ‘[t]he old people’ which suggests a certain resistance on his part to come to terms with the orthodoxies of the present. The woman also resists the idea of accepting the fate of her child and moving forward with her grief. It would appear he does not expect his beliefs to be followed by the woman but the reader is left with the impression that the whole episode has irrevocably altered his outlook on life.

When he returns home, he is short-tempered and spends a restless night with nightmares about the cemetery and the rats. His wife is upset by his altered demeanour but Sissie delights in the estrangement between her sister and the carter. Just as Hallie is oblivious to the needs of her friends, Sissie selfishly usurps her brother-in-law’s place, adopting the quasi-role of lover as she whistles, lays out a board game and compliments her sister. There is a forced playfulness between them when the carter retires to bed. However, Lavin disrupts the carefully pitched emotional flow of the narrative by concluding with an anticlimax. As the carter’s mood does not improve over the next few days, his wife attributes his altered state to something he ate. There is scope for argument that this is descending into bathos but that would suggest lack of control over the writing. Alternatively, it could be an

intentional comic effect reflecting an instinctive human response exhibited by individuals towards tragic events. Either way, it is one occasion when the reader may be left dissatisfied with Lavin's writing.

Lavin's concern for authenticity in her fiction prompts a certain level of pragmatism in the resultant representations of Ireland. Determining the selection of events, crisis points and examples of individual characteristics to be fictionalised has to be managed against a vast range of sources. This management acknowledges the dichotomy of a broadly functioning social system in Ireland that is sometimes at odds with complex intimate relationships between families and friends, cultural divisions of labour and gender equality, policy making decisions and religious convictions. The fiction addresses female sensibilities and concerns, but also offers a genuine and convincing coverage of the male point of view as with Manny; that holistic practice therefore engenders a more thorough social realism.

This shift between (and focus on) various gender interests is evident from these early collections. For example, 'The Nun's Mother' from *The Long Ago* (1944) and *At Sallygap & Other Stories* (1947), looks at the impact of a decision upon both parents by a young woman to enter into a religious order, although it is driven mainly through a mother's perspective. This was the short story Lavin had been discussing in her correspondence with Ellery Sedgwick in 1940. Some shift in confidence had taken place between then and its first publication, as it is republished with minimum revision within three years. The omniscient narration allows the reader intimate access to the thoughts and fears of Mrs Latimer, the mother, on the ride home from her daughter's final mass, where she was to become part of the religious order. It does not matter which religious order; the metonymic nature of the

cloister implicitly references the Catholic Church and breaks the bond between both parents and their child. This is a story of loss and regret, with a sense that nothing will ever be the same again. It also offers a bold and explicit rendition of female sexuality through its close reference to the intimacies of married life.

Although there is minimal communication between husband and wife on the journey, reflecting the earlier silences between mother and daughter, it is through Maud Latimer that her husband's fears and insecurities are channelled. If we trust this narrative strategy, then Lavin succeeds in demonstrating the full impact of Angela Latimer's decision to abstain from marriage and a family, and in the event to withdraw from public life. Mrs Latimer is a self-absorbed woman yet Lavin manages to bring about some sympathy for her by focusing on the self-reflexive weariness she exhibits. This potentially offers some resonance with readers. Despite the fact that their daughter's choice affected both of them and would have taken its toll in equal measure, Mrs Latimer is concerned with the deterioration in her own appearance as 'it had taken more effect on herself all the same [where] only this morning she had seen a fleck or two of grey hair reflected in the mirror'.<sup>97</sup>

Luke Latimer would have preferred almost anything else to have happened to his daughter. Far from being a badge of honour to have a son or daughter enter into the Church, it felt like a waste, a betrayal of fecundity as the line of heredity would cease. The euphemistically structured phrasing, with its implied suggestion that loss of virginity and possible pregnancy was less of a challenge than the loss of a

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<sup>97</sup> Mary Lavin, 'The Nun's Mother', *At Sallygap and Other Stories* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1947), p. 34. All further references are to this edition, and are given in the text.

daughter to the Church, is bravely articulated here and that may well have been at the root of Sedgwick's earlier concerns in his letter<sup>98</sup>:

Really and truly she quite believed that Luke had been more hurt and repulsed by what Angela had done than he would have been had she got into some serious scrape or other. Yes, even *that* kind of scrape. ('The Nun's Mother', p. 35)

The reader is left in no doubt that the purpose of parenthood is to support the expected evolution of the family, looking forward to one's own children becoming parents, and then grandparents, but there is an odd sense of fear emerging as Maud Latimer's interior monologue progresses. As she recognises the implications of her daughter's decision she is freed from the social and religious constraint of obedience and becomes more outspoken, at least in her thoughts. Her focus is on sexual matters. Maud's view of women is tainted; 'covert and sly when they were alone, so prudish, so guarded' ('The Nun's Mother', p. 40). This is at odds with her confident articulation of how she feels about the sexual connection between men and women. A series of tableaux frame this discordant, one might say disloyal, appraisal of her own sex: women dressing and undressing 'under slips and nightdresses' set against men who were 'normal [...] walking around with nothing on. And if they were given any encouragement they'd never wear bathing suits' ('The Nun's Mother', pp. 40-41). There is a concentrated flashback inscribing her own encounters onto her daughter's lack of sexual experience: 'the heavy weight of the hard male breast, the terror, the pain, the soft delirium seeping through' is coupled with her attempts to image women's bodies as 'so much more graceful; moulded so secretly, so subtly'

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<sup>98</sup>Letter from Ellery Sedgwick to Mary Lavin dated 12 December 1939: Gotlieb Archive.

(‘The Nun’s Mother’, p. 44, p. 41). Read now, albeit out of context, that synthesis of innocence, fear, hurt and eventual euphoria may resonate with the normalised eroticism of Mills and Boon fictions or chick-lit; in addition, the candid nature of Maud’s thoughts potentially places this narrative at risk to a hostile response at the time of its publication. Within the safety of the narrative, Maud is fortunate in being able to articulate, even to herself, her own sexual desires and successes even if through an internally constructed feverish onslaught of images. The omniscient narration is complicit in this sexualisation of the moment, focusing on Maud’s breast rising and falling, following the journey of a coral brooch ‘from the depths of sepia lace and down again to its hollows’ (‘The Nun’s Mother’, p. 45). Her triumph is evident as she revels in a sexual energy she knows is now denied her daughter: ‘None of all the women she knew had lived with love as long and as intimately as she had done. No one knew what love was as well as she’ (‘The Nun’s Mother’, p. 45). Yet somehow above all this she believes that relinquishing her daughter to the Church is going to stop the intimate exchanges between herself and her husband; she must now ‘act and think like a nun’s mother’ (‘The Nun’s Mother’, p. 44).

The abrupt shift from an erotic tableau to the finality of sexual suppression all in the name of religious belief is challenging and demoralising. The disorientation that Maud experiences on this journey triggers memories of how she felt after her daughter Angela was born, and reinforces the terrible sense of parental obligation that she felt then towards her daughter and future generations. In what appears as a dream sequence, Maud recalls a dystopian vision of her descendants:

strange , terrifying people; lawyers, doctors, soldiers, nurses, deans with rolled parchments, drunkards, men of business, cheats, liars [...] with



frightened faces, and each face had the cast of hers [...] All were better never born. ('The Nun's Mother', pp. 47-48)

The sense of responsibility is overwhelming, darkly articulated for a Catholic Irishwoman. Instead of joy at the birth of her daughter we see fear, and the release in the present narrative from that responsibility is shocking. It appears that salvation has come in a twisted way: release your daughter to the church and you will then be free. In fact, their responsibility for as yet unborn lives ceased as 'Angela had cut them both adrift from the shore of the menacing future. There would be no people branching out into armies of evil in the years beyond control' ('The Nun's Mother', p. 48). There is a cost; with that release is future barrenness for the family. As Lavin manipulates the reader with her use of flashback within the present narrative, somewhat at odds with the realist chronological narrative, movement is slowed into a nightmare scenario. The safety and security of 'natural' provision of children through marriage is questioned in this delusional episode. Interestingly, this attention towards an individual's accountability for affirmative social construction in terms of bloodline is returned to in 'The Becker Wives'. It suggests Lavin is compelled to draw attention to the most private and ultimately determining issues that would impact on society, if an authentic depiction of Ireland is to be managed by her. Notably, the question of blemished psychological inheritance also sits alongside conditions of fecundity and sterility in 'The Becker Wives'; Lavin returns again and again to these themes over the course of her career. As in 'The Nun's Mother', there is a sense of protection for the future of the wider family in not producing another generation from one particular family stem.

This anticipated barrenness in ‘The Nun’s Mother’ and ‘The Becker Wives’ counters Section 6 (1) of the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act.<sup>99</sup> Whilst the Act is concerned with highlighting literary content advocating ‘the unnatural prevention of conception or the procurement of abortion or miscarriage or the use of any method, treatment or appliance for the purpose of such prevention’, and clearly does not consider admission to Holy Orders an example of such mechanistic avoidance, Lavin embarks on a difficult course when she fashions joy amongst this sterile future for the family.<sup>100</sup> Lavin’s frequent reminders in interviews that she was a Catholic suggest there is more than mere railing against the system here. Lavin implies that women rationalise various routes in order to negotiate religious, social and personal obstacles. Lavin does not deny a woman’s right to experience pleasure. In fact, in a later interview with the *Boston Sunday Globe* she says:

I don’t think Irish women are as oppressed as many think them to be. Irish women enjoy sex. Many enjoy it before they are married and it’s not a test of whether or not they are fertile [...]. They have happy lives.<sup>101</sup>

This interview was twenty-seven years after publication of *At Sallygap & Other Stories*, thirty years after *The Long Ago and Other Stories*, but ‘The Nun’s Mother’ clearly reads with the same sentiments as the *Boston Sunday Globe* interview.

### **Outside of the realist mode**

In conjunction with the realist narratives, Lavin also introduces surreal episodes closely allied to the tradition of the folk tale or to the fable elsewhere in a number of

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<sup>99</sup> *Censorship of Publications Act 1929*, no. 21 (Dublin: The Stationery Office, 1929), p. 9.

<sup>100</sup> *Censorship of Publications Act 1929*, p. 9.

<sup>101</sup> Otile McManus, ‘Mary Lavin: A Jolly Irish Story Teller’, *Boston Sunday Globe*, 5 May 1974, pp. A9 and A17, press cuttings fol. 1: James Joyce Library.

her short stories. While these supernatural references might appear to be in stark contrast with the majority of Lavin's fiction, they have an important part to play. These episodes encode traditional notions of moral behaviour, demonstrating Lavin clearly has an intellectual interest in retaining long-established storytelling techniques. This secures added gravitas for the short story with its alliance to much older literary forms. However, their place within the larger body of work is problematic. The predisposition of the collections is undoubtedly towards a much stronger realist approach. Whilst this group of stories offers a synthesis of folklore and the contemporary moment, it produces a contrast that is so great that it forces a reappraisal of how those texts function within the body of work as a whole. This is a welcome shift, foregrounding the fine distinctions in Lavin's writing; nonetheless it can disrupt a secure sense of how Lavin is read. Lavin was acutely aware of perceived currency in relation to her fiction. In an interview with Eavan Boland she recalls being asked if she was afraid of her work being obsolete. Her response is telling:

[W]hat occurred to me is that every framework gets obsolete and what you are doing is showing people against the existing framework or even against frameworks that have crumbled beyond recognition – yet that very framework was the very hurdle they had to get over.<sup>102</sup>

Lavin's acknowledgement that change is inevitable in itself identifies the nature of fiction as a repository for soon to be outmoded concepts. Yet the framework of oral culture and folklore traditions in her fictions is grounded in a fairly recent historical

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<sup>102</sup> Eavan Boland, 'Eavan Boland Talks to Mary Lavin', *This Week* (Arts in Ireland) 3:35 (29 June 1972), pp. 40-42, p. 41: Lavin private collection: Navan Library, Meath County Council.

recognition of its importance.<sup>103</sup> As such, Lavin's reference to older structures, in this case popular culture, positions these subject-matters solidly at a point at which they recognisably exist – the present. Those dreamlike or fantastic moments in her fictions are as relevant in the 1940s as Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's fictions are today. Ní Dhuibhne's memories of her own participation in the Urban Folklore Project in Dublin (1979-1980) cogently illustrate the persistence of stories that disseminate the histories of urban communities. Her experience was, she recalls, 'a folkloristic *blitzkrieg*, a systematic and intensive trawl of the oral culture of one place'.<sup>104</sup> These echoes of the Folklore Commission's earlier 1938-9 project for schoolchildren provide a point of staged linkage when appraising Lavin's fictions. Although Ní Dhuibhne's involvement with the folklore project was nearly ten years after Lavin's interview, it clearly demonstrates the point that Lavin makes with regard to building on existing or declining structures. Scholarly interest in folklore continues to grow, fostered by the experience and knowledge of previous generations.

Reappraising Lavin's fictions also provides a crucial opportunity to determine to what extent this 'otherworldly' influence permeates the texts. Rather than diffusing the impact of the realist narratives, however, the complexities of her variant writing styles and the confident use of folklore, complement a keen awareness of rural and small-town Ireland that proves the vital bedrock for a major part of her work, that is, the realist depiction of the Ireland that she knew. It is evident that Lavin's corpus of work resists simplistic labelling. Three key short stories in

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<sup>103</sup> Angela Bourke, ed., 'Oral Traditions', *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, Volume 4, ed. by Angela Bourke et al., (Cork: Cork University Press in association with Field Day, 2002), pp. 1191-1197.

<sup>104</sup> Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, "They made me tea and gave me a lift home': Urban Folklore Collecting 1979-1980', *Béaloides*, 73 (2005), 69-83 (p. 66) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20520878>> [accessed 28 September 2011].

particular highlight an association with this much older Irish storytelling tradition that Lavin clearly has an interest in: these are ‘A Fable’ in *Tales from Bective Bridge*, ‘Chamois Gloves’ in *The Patriot Son and Other Stories* and a later tale ‘The Mug of Water’ in *The Shrine and Other Stories*.<sup>105</sup> They are noteworthy as they reference Lavin’s engagement with the strange and fantastic, but still ally themselves closely enough to a fictional realism more familiar to Irish readers. ‘The Dead Soldier’ in *Tales from Bective Bridge* also marks the supernatural, but its more powerful overtones of one woman’s reaction to grief set it apart.

There are generic tensions highlighted in critical responses to Lavin’s engagement with the folkloric. In a special edition of *Irish University Review* dedicated to Mary Lavin, Marianne Koenig asserts that:

Reading these stories one is often surprised, so strong is the sense of the fabulous, to find that they are realistic at all, let alone as they frequently [sic] are in their attachment to the mundane details of everyday Irish life. Myth and folk-lore, fairy-tales and ghost stories, underlie Mary Lavin’s work.<sup>106</sup>

Where Koenig suggests conflict, however, I believe there is far more value in interpreting Lavin’s engagement with the folk-tale as complementary to realist modes. Koenig offers a range of short story exemplars engaging to a greater or lesser extent with the fairy-tale and folk-tale in her essay on Lavin’s work. These include ‘The Becker Wives’ which she regards as ‘[t]he longest and most

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<sup>105</sup> Mary Lavin, ‘The Mug of Water’, *The Shrine and Other Stories* (London: Constable, 1977), pp. 73-113. All further references are to this edition, and are given in the text.

<sup>106</sup> Marianne Koenig, ‘Mary Lavin: The Novels and the Stories’, *Irish University Review*, 9:2 (Autumn 1979), 244-261 (p. 251).

sophisticated, most brilliant and perhaps most sombre story to combine everyday life and fairy tale into moral fable'.<sup>107</sup> It is without a doubt Lavin's finest work, and vastly underrated, but has far more gradation than Koenig's reading of a moral indicating 'Pride goes before a fall'.<sup>108</sup>

There is a danger of over-simplifying deceptively accessible texts, to shaping a reading of those texts towards a specific, localised genre of the folk tale, of directing and suppressing variant readings in the process. Such narratives, associated with a peasantry or common people, are echoes of a traditional life that pre-dates modernity and new order. They stand outside of a contemporary, seemingly progressive sensibility and reflect looking back to a cultural value system that may no longer be recognised, rather than looking forward.<sup>109</sup> Lavin's view is unhampered by such logistical paradigms as she moves between time frames and topical interests. What is useful in Koenig's reading is an understanding of the 'direction' that Lavin's short stories offer: 'a full transcription of everyday life [that is] accepted in all its gravity'.<sup>110</sup> There is some merit therefore in linking 'The Becker Wives' and other stories to fairy and folk tales. Lavin's acknowledgement and use of these repositories of customs and beliefs suggests a keen awareness of wider historical and contemporary appreciation of their worth. Lavin's fictions engage with core interests of cultural reclamation that were, for instance, at the centre of the Irish Folklore Commission's mission. Sean O'Sullivan states that the Commission (established by the government in April 1935), was charged with 'the purpose of collecting, cataloguing, and eventually publishing the best of what remained of Irish oral

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<sup>107</sup> Koenig, 'Mary Lavin', p. 253.

<sup>108</sup> Koenig, 'Mary Lavin', p. 253.

<sup>109</sup> Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, *Locating Irish Folklore Tradition, Modernity, Identity* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000), p. 11.

<sup>110</sup> Koenig, 'Mary Lavin', p. 261.

tradition'.<sup>111</sup> Equally important, in terms of depicting rural and small-town Ireland, Lavin appreciates an inherited sense (within that micro-context) of ordinary Irish people's connection with much older traditions. Finally, Lavin engages with the structure of these traditional narratives, crafting newer versions of older tales that still reflect a continuity of experience.

Ritual responses to tragedy, for instance, are re-created amongst rural and coastal communities in 'The Green Grave and the Black Grave'.<sup>112</sup> It has a companion piece in 'The Bridal Sheets'.<sup>113</sup> The discovery of a body in the sea late at night by two fishermen opens the narrative. 'It was a body all right', the first sentence, is repeated soon after as part of a complicated rhetoric of kinship stature: Tadg Mor, as father, has the final word in a sequence shifting the conversation from what the fishermen saw and did, to surmising what might have happened before discovery of the body. Their conversation reveals how they make sense of the events of the night:

"I knew it was a shout I heard" said Tadg Mor.

"I knew it was a boat I saw ..." said Tadg Beag.

"I said the sound I heard was a kittiwake, crying in the dark."

"And I said the boat I saw was a black wave blown up on the wind."

"It was a shout all right."

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<sup>111</sup> Sean O'Sullivan, *Folktales of Ireland* [1966] (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. xxxiii.

<sup>112</sup> Mary Lavin, 'The Green Grave and the Black Grave', *Tales From Bective Bridge*, [1942] (London: Michael Joseph, 1945). All further references are to this edition, and are given in the text.

<sup>113</sup> Mary Lavin, 'Bridal Sheets', *The Great Wave and Other Stories* [1961] (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962).

“It was a boat all right.”

“It was a body all right.”

“But where is the black boat?” said Tadg Beag.

“It must be that the black boat capsized,” said Tadg Mor, “and went down into the green sea.” (‘The Green Grave’, p. 33)

In some instances this type of reflected comment is itself mirrored by physical action and a sense of inevitability, especially as the narrative moves towards its close. The opening sequence above, with its verbal echoes, follows the unified pattern of movement as the two men head for shore, ‘pulling stroke for stroke at the sea’ (‘The Green Grave’, p. 33). The fishermen recall the other lost souls on their way back to shore, knowing that this man in particular will be missed as his young wife, a ‘one-year wife’, was an inland woman not used to the inevitable sacrifices the sea forces on a marriage. They believe community codes and mores are only understood within the right context: “‘An island man should take an island wife,’” said Tadg Beag. Tadg Mor replies, “‘An inland woman should take an inland man’” (‘The Green Grave’, p. 36). They wish to return Eamon Og Murnan’s body to his young wife, but she herself had gone out fishing with her husband and drowned with him. By the time they return to the shore to retrieve his body, it has itself been dragged back into the sea. The concluding narrative reflection highlights a change in the customs and practices of the islanders whilst at the same time acknowledging that those very customs made sense in harsh island life:



Eamon Og Murnan would be held fast in the white sea-arms of his one-year wife, who came from the islands where women have no knowledge of the sea and have only a knowledge of love. ('The Green Grave', p. 47)

The young wife's disappearance prompts the memory of an island woman Inghean Og, as she recalls the young woman's previous outcry against the tyranny of the sea. In an extended moving paragraph suggesting a progressive intellectual movement away from the fatalism of an island community, the young woman's war against the elements is brought to life in thirteen remembered statements prefixed by 'She said'. For example, the young wife's references to the sea as having a 'scabby back' able to 'drag' a body down metaphorically suggest the physicality of a monstrous creature ('The Green Grave', p. 45). Inghean Og remembers that '[s]he said that the sea wanted taming and besting' ('The Green Grave', p. 46). This interplay between tradition and progression embodied in Eamon Og's wife is characteristic of Lavin's interests elsewhere in her fiction. The episode itself is framed by the reality of the dangers of fishing.

As Peterson argues, the influence of J. M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* can be felt in the patterning of idiomatic and local dialect in this short story, an unusual departure for Lavin.<sup>114</sup> However, Lavin makes it her own in denying Synge's insistence on the domestic restriction for women, placing her female protagonist, wife of the drowned man Eamon Og Murnan, in the boat with her husband. She had refused to be parted from him any longer during fishing expeditions. Here also, the ritual patterning of island voices simulates prayer responses. This continues from the initial discovery of his body by a father and son themselves fishing in the night

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<sup>114</sup> Peterson, *Mary Lavin*, pp. 101-103.

waters, to the final lament as Eamon Og's unsupervised body returns to the sea. The anticipated customary keening of the island women for the loss of a fisherman is preceded by the to and fro of Tadg Mor and Tadg Beag's own lamentation throughout. The island will now mourn the loss of a couple married barely a year. However, 'The Green Grave and the Black Grave' is more than a reworking of Synge's play: it is Lavin acknowledging a traditional occupation and community support structure whilst, at the same time, establishing new patterns of behaviour that reflect a more modern society. It follows the expectations of genre in its vocal repetition, as Tadg Mor's observations are reflected back by his son Tadg Beag.

Lavin's appreciation of the integral position of folklore in Irish society, and as such her portrayal of Irish life as she saw it, can be analysed in terms of Angela Bourke's account of fairy-tale belief and practice in Ireland in the 1890s; in particular, in connection with the murder of Bridget Cleary in 1895. Amongst numerous examples of the tragedies resultant from the belief in the supernatural and superstition, Bourke cites Sir William Wilde's research on Irish folklore in the nineteenth century, referring to the case of 'a man in the county of Kerry [who] roasted his child to death, under the impression that it was a fairy'.<sup>115</sup> The man in question was not brought to trial as the authorities viewed him as insane. To a twenty-first-century reader, this example is horrifying both for the loss of a young life and the blurring of distinction between popular superstitious belief and the law. Wilde himself considers the judgement made as 'mercifully' attributing insanity.<sup>116</sup> Bourke evidences that in his unique position as physician, antiquary and folklorist Wilde read reports about the perpetrators of appalling crimes against individuals who

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<sup>115</sup> Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story* (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 33.

<sup>116</sup> W. R. Wilde, *Irish Popular Superstitions* [1852] (New York: Sterling Publishing Co, Inc. 1995), p. 12.

‘were usually treated leniently by the courts, which recognized the component of “superstition” in their actions’.<sup>117</sup> This legitimising and support of the influence of the supernatural on communities in the early part of the nineteenth century pre-empted what Lavin observed within her own communities much later, that is, acceptance of the fairy tale and folk narrative in shaping rural practices.

Koenig’s essay foreshadows a much lengthier study of Lavin’s use of the folk narrative by Jacqueline Fulmer in 2007. In *Folk Women and Indirection in Morrison, Ní Dhuibhne, Hurston and Lavin*, Fulmer argues that key figures in Lavin’s two novels can also be closely allied to ‘Otherworldly or “wise-women” female characters’.<sup>118</sup> The figures of Mary in *Mary O’Grady* and Onny from *The House in Clewe Street* are closely examined in this way; although highlighted here, these novels do not form a major part of this discussion but serve as exemplars of Lavin’s flexibility in terms of embracing different genres. However, having pitched the connection with folklore as a strategy for misdirection in Lavin’s work and others, Fulmer falls short of committing the main protagonist, Mary O’Grady, to the nomenclature of ‘wise woman’.<sup>119</sup> Fulmer argues the use of time-honoured alternative figures is present in Lavin’s fiction; her reading of *Mary O’Grady* suggests that these figures emerge from a folkloric tradition and redirect attention from what could be termed explicitly challenging content in Lavin’s novels, making their content more palatable. Potentially, this is appealing for a readership either searching for new modes of expression or retreating to familiar narrative often embedded in simpler form in childhood bedtime stories, or wider community

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<sup>117</sup> Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*, p. 34.

<sup>118</sup> Jacqueline Fulmer, *Folk Women and Indirection in Morrison, Ní Dhuibhne, Hurston and Lavin* (Hampshire, England and Burlington, USA: Ashgate, 2007), p. 10.

<sup>119</sup> Fulmer, *Folk Women*, p. 50. Mary Lavin, *The House in Clewe Street* [1945] (London: Virago Press, 1987); *Mary O’Grady* [1950] (London: Virago Press, 1986).

storytelling practice. Undeniably the projection of interest towards magical and supernatural figures, and allusion to behaviours associated with such characters, is an interesting shift of emphasis, and one that Fulmer makes use of in her study of Irish and African American narratives. However, it presumes an automatic, almost passive gravitation towards the folkloric by Lavin that is not fully substantiated.

Citing Leah Levenson, Fulmer argues that:

Lavin's milieu was soaked in a nationalistic use of folklore, such that for her, it was more challenging not to foreground folklore in a milieu where "tradition was the byword" and modernist writers were often censored.<sup>120</sup>

Yet Lavin's writing confidently straddles tradition and modernity, and so her engagement with older forms and content of storytelling should be approached with an open mind.

Fulmer fails to recognise that Levenson is in fact commenting on 1930s' Ireland as she notes 'Mary's career was getting under way at an inauspicious time'.<sup>121</sup> This statement cannot be used to suggest, as Fulmer does, that Lavin predictably uses folklore material. Eventually, Fulmer does concede a broader palette where 'Lavin integrates folklore into a style that favours realism and "modern" Irish settings, whether urban or rural'.<sup>122</sup> This initial suggestion of a passive inevitability of practice, where Lavin utilises traditional folk tales and storytelling as an easy option, is too simplistic. If familiarity and custom, without recognition and understanding, dominate Lavin's approach to writing, that challenges the promise of her early collections. Nevertheless, there is merit in highlighting

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<sup>120</sup> Fulmer, *Folk Women*, p. 51.

<sup>121</sup> Leah Levenson, *The Four Seasons of Mary Lavin* (Dublin: Marino Books, 1998), p. 63.

<sup>122</sup> Fulmer, *Folk Women*, p. 51.

Lavin's integration of old and new narrative practices. The stories should be read as products of an astute, and culturally knowledgeable, practitioner of the arts.

Fulmer still insists Lavin inevitably utilises the traditions of folklore to talk about what she describes as:

[D]elicate areas [that] have included unequal relations between the sexes, anything that could appear critical of secular or religious authority, and questions regarding women's limited sphere of activity in mid-twentieth century Ireland.<sup>123</sup>

This deflection, or indirection, she argues, frees the writer to introduce 'difficult subject matter to unwilling audiences'.<sup>124</sup> With this challenge to certain readers in mind, in her comparison of Lavin and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's work, Fulmer considers that all of their characters 'undermine different aspects of patriarchal authority'.<sup>125</sup> Fulmer suggests Lavin does this by adopting 'aspects of otherworldly and wise women [in characters'] words, thoughts, qualities and actions'; Ní Dhuibhne's characters, she suggests, focus more on the 'magical world'.<sup>126</sup> Clearly, as Lavin's work remained in print during the height of censorship there is some strategy in play. However, Lavin's preferred mode of realism is the more evident and influential mode of her writing. 'The Nun's Mother' clearly circumnavigates these difficulties. The fiction unmistakably addresses those difficult areas that Fulmer suggests could not otherwise be dealt with. Lavin's lightness of touch in dealing with 'delicate areas' is confident enough to withstand scrutiny; she does not need the screen of an

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<sup>123</sup> Fulmer, *Folk Women*, pp. 60-61.

<sup>124</sup> Fulmer, *Folk Women*, p. 1.

<sup>125</sup> Fulmer, *Folk Women*, p. 61.

<sup>126</sup> Fulmer, *Folk Women*, p. 61.

older tradition. So how else she chooses to use that tradition is worthy of note. Lavin was prepared to make critical observations about Ireland in her writing, so this shift to folklore cannot be construed as Lavin's only viable strategy for successful publication. In light of Lavin's desire to record and preserve what she saw as 'the real life of living Irishmen and women whom I have known and seen with my own eyes', this also suggests an active acknowledgement of, and engagement with, traditional practice and culture.<sup>127</sup> Lavin's fictional depictions of Ireland are constructed within a framework of intentional accuracy; her additional comment, 'I'd like to preserve them [the Irish], rather than the diluted culture that is being shown by tourist bodies and agencies – all good and no bad', serves as an agenda.<sup>128</sup> As part of my future research, I will adopt a particular line of investigation to explore the synthesis of folklore within more modern realist settings. The aim would be to gauge the full impact of this combination.

Fulmer charts the echoes of folklore inherent in Lavin's longer fiction, referring to Angela Bourke's recognition of what was termed a 'fairy stroke' in relation to an emotionally charged episode, where the female protagonist appears frozen and unconscious in *Mary O'Grady*.<sup>129</sup> However, similar resonances can also be found in the short fiction 'A Fable'. 'The Mug of Water' is in fact more explicit, but neither short story is addressed in Fulmer's analysis. 'A Fable' tells the story of a newcomer to a village. It follows the more generic conventions of the folk tale in that unnamed or everyman or everywoman characters frame the story; after all,

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<sup>127</sup> L. Robert Stevens and Sylvia Stevens, 'An Interview with Mary Lavin', *Studies*, 86:341 (1997), 43-50 (p. 46).

<sup>128</sup> Stevens and Stevens, 'An Interview with Mary Lavin', p. 47.

<sup>129</sup> Fulmer, *Folk Women*, p. 68. This phenomenon is recorded as a category of interest in: Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *Handbook of Irish Folklore* (Dublin: The Educational Company of Ireland, 1942), p. 478. This publication was an aid to the collection and classification of folklore material to be held at the Irish Folklore Commission.

ultimately this must in some way apply to the reader or earlier listener. Highlighting Lavin's earlier fables, Kelly notes that ritual devices are 'used as central images, or what [Lavin] calls "devices of concentration", round which the allegorical element takes shape'.<sup>130</sup> In 'A Fable', these images are centred on the use of natural vegetation or briars; this contributes to a turning point in the relationship between the community and the outsider. The newcomer is a beautiful woman, recognised by the omniscient narrator in the opening line of the story as 'the most beautiful woman they had ever seen and so they hated her'.<sup>131</sup> Her presence is unconventional in that there is no warning of her arrival, she travelled alone and had the mark of independence often found threatening to others. At first the light-hearted humour is entertaining. The narrator confides, '[t]o tell the truth, the perfection of this fabulously beautiful girl was really beginning to get on the nerves of the whole neighbourhood' ('A Fable', p. 135). The tone alters as the villagers are in some way disempowered by the woman: she contravenes social expectations by living alone and has a wide circle of friends from the city. Her beauty threatens other women and emasculates the men. Her skin is like flawless porcelain. She is closely allied to the natural world. By the light of the sun she is first viewed by the villagers 'against the blue breast of the sky [...] She was beautiful every hour of the day, but in the early sunlight she was perhaps most beautiful' ('A Fable', p. 133). This diurnal assessment is clearly sexually driven by the transformative connection of sky and human form. The physical villagers are left physically shocked, stimulated and then lethargic, as the narrative plays with the excesses of 'gusts of a great emotion' and depleted energy to echo the act of sexual intercourse ('A Fable', p. 133). At the

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<sup>130</sup> Kelly, *Mary Lavin*, p. 145.

<sup>131</sup> Lavin, 'A Fable', *Tales from Bective Bridge* [1942] (London: Michael Joseph, 1945), p. 132. All further references are to this edition, and are given in the text.

same time, her alliance with nature resonates with pre-Christian beliefs, and elevates her from beyond human to the role of pagan goddess. The community keep their distance.

One day she is out hunting, keenly observed by the villagers as usual, and has a terrible fall. The speed and pattern of the story slows as the reader is forced to confront her terrible disfigurement. Thick, strong bramble thorns cut into her face to form 'a blood etching of the brier branch itself' ('A Fable', p. 136). She had ridden into the branch at such speed it had exerted tremendous force on the skin, which had to be sewn together. We are reminded by the narrator that 'fine porcelain cracks more easily than delft, and shows the mark of its mending' ('A Fable', p. 138). Her face is scarred. A range of visual references is employed to emphasise the impact that this accident has on the community that day, intercutting the more trivial and mundane with the extraordinary. As the narrative unfolds, an empathic resonance is engendered to connect the victim with the hitherto alienated villagers; the sensory impact upon them of her broken body after the accident is immense and contextualised within their own working environments. As the postmistress goes about her business, in her eyes, the victim's damaged porcelain skin is juxtaposed with the bright white of an envelope that she holds, itself scarred by a vividly red stamp; a ladybird is thrown from the petals of white cyclamen by the gardener who is shocked by the violence of the insect's colouring against the fragile petals; the draper's wife, completing the domestic preparations of killing a bird for supper, is more aware of the cruelty of the exercise with the red blood against white feathers, and the schoolmaster is drawn to read *Macbeth* again as a final marker of the extraordinary event witnessed ('A Fable', pp. 136-137).



Over the course of two years the community re-evaluates its relationship with her: they now feel that she belongs, she is no threat to them. Now their refrain is, ‘[w]ere it not for the scar on her face, would she not be the most beautiful girl in all the land?’ (‘A Fable, p. 139). They are happy for her when she travels to Vienna to have skin grafted over the scars, and pray for her whilst she is away. They burn so many candles in the church to remember her that they exhaust all their supplies. Her sudden re-appearance following her treatment temporarily unnerves them as there is no trace of the accident on her face; they almost retreat to the same distance as shown towards her when she first arrived amongst them. Their coping mechanism is to believe the scars will reappear over time. They really only feel able to accept her in this way, because they cannot reconcile themselves to the fact that she will be totally cured. The story ends with the resolution of a natural order: she marries and has children and grandchildren (a device to note the passing of time as well as denote her worth), and the villagers retain a sense of control in their continued belief in the restoration of her scars, as the expected lines and wrinkles appear on her face as she ages. It is not a wholly satisfactory conclusion, as the narrative professes to a type of truth only being revealed to the older villagers nearing the end of their lives; seemingly they recognise she was more beautiful with the scars than without. Does this mean that there was no impact on the younger villagers?

This is problematic, as although it intimates some intellectual and emotional growth in the collective mind, it still makes evident a resistance to attractiveness in others. In the end, the story itself implies that the woman would never be accepted into their community without that accident, and is a brutal, bleak assessment of life. The parochial nature of its Irish location unsettlingly damns the Meath population

itself with its topographical and social links: there is direct reference to the ‘Meet of the Harriers’ (‘A Fable’, p. 134).<sup>132</sup> After all, this story is from the collection *Tales from Bective Bridge*, taking as its inspiration the familiar location of Bective. The unnamed, excessively beautiful woman is almost an ethereal presence and needs to be made substantial in the eyes of the community through some rite of passage. At the same time, at its conclusion, the restoration of a traditionally bound reciprocal society with gender defined status roles is an interesting choice for Lavin, so close to implementation of the 1937 Irish Constitution.<sup>133</sup> It suggests that ‘A Fable’ could be read as an early test site where Lavin critiques the limitations of certain traditional values. By using physical perfection as a marker of distinctiveness, rather than religious or economic status, Lavin is not yet fully committing to a particular line of attack.

The initial publication date of this short story in 1942 is significant in another way. It follows new work dedicated to the collection and preservation of Irish folklore by the Irish Folklore Commission. This work was recognised as essential to the restoration and support of the Irish language and Irish culture, and was funded in part by an annual government grant. So imbued in the national psyche was this enterprise, that between 1937 and 1938 Irish schoolchildren were asked to collect stories from grandparents, and other elders in their communities. These they transcribed into notebooks which were returned to the Commission.<sup>134</sup> Amongst the literary community, the enormous work undertaken by collectors and archivists at the

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<sup>132</sup> The Tara Harriers (formerly Bellinter Harriers) were a hunt pack in County Meath. ML 628, box 33, fol. 11: Gotlieb Archive.

<sup>133</sup> Lavin’s personal interpretation of an Irish resistance to beauty is briefly addressed in the Big House section of this research citing a letter from Mary Lavin dated 26 April 1940 to the editor of *Atlantic Monthly*: MHS.

<sup>134</sup> Bríd Mahon, *While Green Grass Grows: Memoirs of a Folklorist* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1998), pp. 44, 47.

Irish Folklore Commission was also recognised; there appears to have been an open-door policy supporting access to archive material and records. Frank O'Connor, Benedict Kiely and Maura Laverty are amongst those recorded as visiting the Commission.<sup>135</sup> Over the course of her writing career Lavin's literary circle undoubtedly exchanged experiences of their visits there. A pseudo-autobiography *The Farm by Lough Gur* (1937) had been published containing a wealth of superstition and folklore, and the Blasket Island collections such as Tomás Ó Crohan's *The Islandman* (1929), Maurice O'Sullivan's *Twenty years a-growing* (1933) and Peig Sayers' *Peig* (1936) disseminated valuable new stories of custom, practice and belief also. As these earlier narratives of life history and folklore were in the public domain they could also be drawn on.

'The Mug of Water' is a much later short story; first published in *Southern Review* (1974) it only appears thereafter in *The Shrine and Other Stories* (1977).<sup>136</sup> Honeymooners Esmay and Denis are set to travel to Dublin and then intend hiring a car for a few days. No further plans have been made, but a chance encounter with an archaeologist on the plane over from London to Dublin meant that they then embarked on a journey to County Mayo the next day. Denis is university-educated, and the differences between himself and Esmay are relayed in a retrospective early in the narrative after the omniscient narrator has set the scene. While Denis is destined to be a medical doctor, and is assuredly confident about his own stature, Esmay is better versed in social convention and appearance. Lavin highlights this disparity

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<sup>135</sup> All are recorded in Bríd Mahon's memoirs. The diaries of Séamus Ennis also give a fascinating detailed insight into the life of one collector of folk music: *Going to the Well for Water: The Séamus Ennis Field Diary 1942- 1946*, ed. Ríonach úí Ógáin, [2009] (Cork: Cork University Press, 2010). Mahon also recalls Séamus Ennis' time at the Commission in her memoirs, pp. 63–66.

<sup>136</sup> Mary Lavin, 'The Mug of Water', *The Shrine and Other Stories* (London: Constable, 1977). All further references are to this edition, and are given in the text.

and introduces a gender distinction that plays throughout the narrative. Esmay has a better grasp of the information they have read in the leaflets and maps, and is more practical about preparing to enter into the dark recesses of burial chambers. Denis is overly solicitous, if not patronising, about her fears when she is tired and concerned about entering a confined space. He remembers little of what he had been told by the archaeologist, blustering through the passageways and using up the last of their matches; she, however, can recall every detail despite not actually having attended too closely to his lecture. The experience in the chamber disturbs equilibrium between them; their short journey into an underworld is only relieved when they return to the sunlight, albeit separately at first. Then they can begin to interact meaningfully again: playfully, sexually and intellectually their relationship is acted out on the hill, with an undercurrent of the friction between them showing itself intermittently. As they return to the car, Esmay is thirsty and frustrated by a lack of clean water. Despite a stream nearby, she cannot drink to relieve her thirst as cow dung has run into it. A hut holds more promise, but as they consider knocking at the door Esmay says something very strange to Denis: ‘Do you think the people here might be what Professor Merrit called folk people?’ (‘The Mug of Water’, p. 109). This simple question references the past rather than more immediate practical considerations. Denis recalls nothing of the reference but Esmay’s suggestion foreshadows the peculiar event that follows.

The woman of the house brings water to the door and then turns to hand the mug to a young girl, of similar age and build to Esmay. It is she who passes the mug outwards. Esmay is only ‘vaguely aware of the girl’s liveness and grace, of her shiny mane of black hair, and her bare feet’ (‘The Mug of Water’, p. 111). Esmay

may be exhibiting signs of bewitchment here, but Denis is not. Surprisingly, despite his medical training, Denis gasps as he sees the girl's exposed face:

The face was half eaten away [...] As if a spell was put upon her Esmay could not drag her eyes away from the ravaged flesh. There were no sores, no festering, and over most of the cheek a covering had grown, more membrane than skin, silvery and tautly drawn, and of a sickly silkiness. ('The Mug of Water', p. 111)

Unlike the accidental disfigurement in 'A Fable' that brings about a type of emotional growth or catharsis in the local population, here there is an ominous sense of permanent decay in the atrophied features. Denis' earlier increasing obsession with visiting the cairns and needing to be right about everything exhausts Esmay (and the reader) but here, in this episode, he embodies a warrior-like vigilance and proactive defence of all women. In a speedily fought battle of 'man versus the supernatural' he takes the mug himself and the anticipated magical exchange is thwarted.<sup>137</sup> The young girl, 'like a wildcat', grabs the mug and breaks it on the ground; the feral female cannot substitute for a male ('The Mug of Water', p. 112). Esmay's abduction (for that is what was planned in the exchange of water) is a form of the changeling substitution.<sup>138</sup> Had she drunk from the mug she would have been trapped in the unknown world of the supernatural. Denis' belief in science is stronger than the power of older magic, and is bound up in his choice of profession. Lavin shifts interest back to a contemporary realism by engaging with this scientific discipline. Esmay and Denis escape towards the normality of their car and lodgings.

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<sup>137</sup> This is one of the mythical tradition categories in *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*, p. 442.

<sup>138</sup> See *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*, 'Woman Taken by Fairies' pp. 473-474, 'Changelings', pp. 475-476.

‘The Mug of Water’ is not dealt with in Peterson’s study of Lavin’s work, despite its publication being within the range of stories he examines: Koenig and Kelly briefly include it in their review of Lavin’s stories.<sup>139</sup> It is an interesting and more obvious choice to examine, as it starkly places the ancient or supernatural against the modern and scientific. The decision Lavin made in prioritising one timeframe over the other, and consequently different belief systems and practices, suggests that, as her career developed, the tension between tradition and modernity still played itself out in her work, even in this later stage of her writing. There is neither rejection of the past, as Lavin adopts the conventions of the folk tale, nor a total embrace of the future. Despite the presence of a rational, scientific mind that saves Esmay, that mind is shown to be self-centred and blinkered to others until the extraordinary shows itself.

‘Chamois Gloves’ (1956) was published midway between ‘A Fable’ (1945) and ‘The Mug of Water’ (1977). There is a different focus here as an angel is the magical presence, although its religious stature to Christian believers distinguishes and elevates it from a fairy form. Lavin creates the coexistence of two different belief systems here, and utilises the inherent tensions to play with a magical element in this tale. It is worth noting here as this merging of realism and the fabulous, so concretely placed within the material religious marker of a convent and the social construction of the family, illustrates the social complexities evident in 1950s Ireland. The creation of a benign angelic presence in this short story is no more at odds with a readership than a biblical narrative, a child’s story or a Sunday sermon.

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<sup>139</sup> Kelly, *Mary Lavin*, p. 171; Koenig, ‘Mary Lavin’, pp. 256, 258.

‘Chamois Gloves’ brings together a mid- twentieth-century social acceptance of other-world experiences with a type of religious fervour that believes equally in the presence of angels. As in ‘The Mug of Water’, Lavin balances the logical and recognisably modern with older beliefs. In ‘Chamois Gloves’, the practical, as well as religious reasons, for entering into convent life, are also evident. Here, the conceit is that readers will tolerate the manifestation of a guardian angel belonging to a young novitiate, Veronica, who is about to take her vows to enter the Order. She is isolated as many other characters in Lavin’s fictions are. The angel is also set apart from her community, finding that her ward has not been tested fully on her religious journey. The doubts expressed by the young novitiate are familiar, formulaic even, and Veronica is not wholly convincing as a main protagonist. She lacks emotional content and in fact, none of the characters exhibits a fully-rounded presence to engender empathy or sympathy automatically in the reader, but then the construction of ‘Chamois Gloves’ as a type of religious fable would preclude this detail. This reduction in character detail is a deliberate strategy on Lavin’s part.

There are missed opportunities in ‘Chamois Gloves’ which, if addressed, would make this a very different short story. A stilted conversation about childbirth between Veronica’s family and the priest fades into the background; it might have proved a fruitful opportunity for Lavin to provide the humour that is evident in ‘My Vocation’. The usual family divisions often exposed in times of emotional upheaval are not really there; in terms of the focal relationship between family and religion, the Latimer family in ‘The Nun’s Mother’ is far more believable. Here, in ‘Chamois Gloves’, awkwardness surrounds the events of the day: we fail to gain entry into the family who are about to leave their daughter and sister behind. Where Lavin

introduces the fantastical and mythological in other collections it is seen as a part of the realist fabric of modern Ireland. This does not always sit easily with reliable detail in the more conventional aspects of her writing. Nevertheless, this disruption is intriguing, even welcome at times; it may suggest a deliberate attempt to demand more from the reader. It is the little guardian angel in 'Chamois Gloves', a background presence, who commands our attention and gradually moves forward. Veronica's eventual acceptance that she has left her former life behind is coupled with the guardian angel's completion of her own role to watch over and protect the soul of the young novitiate; one is reliant upon the other.

There is one pivotal moment when Veronica appears to come alive as a fictional presence and this is linked to the angelic overseer. As the day of celebration comes to an end Veronica is handed her sister Mabel's gloves by the Reverend Mother: her one thought is to clean them for her, and so without thinking she begins to wash them in warm soapy water. It is the intimacy of this act, and the storm of memories that it engenders, that finally makes the reader understand the sacrifices that the young nun has made. An emotional slippage occurs as she reveals her intention to wash the gloves: she recalls that 'she and Mabel always made a point of never wearing the same pair twice without being washed'.<sup>140</sup> One of her vows would have been to renounce all vanities, and this slight reminder of the trappings of social femininity reveals her religious inexperience and personal pride. She is not the only one: the Reverend Mother still battles with her pretentious desire for grapefruit spoons, Sister Ursula is fretful about unannounced guests and their impact on the luncheon provisions and the convent grounds are framed by the excesses of a gravel

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<sup>140</sup> Mary Lavin, 'Chamois Gloves', *The Patriot Son and Other Stories*, (London: Michael Joseph, 1956), p. 62. All further references are to this edition, and are given in the text.



drive too deep to let cars travel easily. Lavin provides entry into what Margaret Mac Curtain calls the ‘secret voicings of a society’.<sup>141</sup> It appears that complete deprivation is slow to come to these members of the Church community, as the nuns still retain independent desires beyond the vows they accepted.

As she continues the tactile connection with the gloves, the heat of the water and slippery sensation of the chamois transport her back to a particular moment at home when she told her sister of her plans to enter into the Order. The interior space at the top of the house had been itself a place of intimacy where two sisters had told each other their secrets, a symbolic meeting place of minds and hearts. This meeting of memory, time and space brings about an instinctive physical reaction and Veronica is unable to stop her tears, a release that has been overdue considering the enormity of the commitment she has undertaken. It is only at this moment that Veronica is real to the reader: she is humbled and overwhelmed and this is the formalisation of sacrifice that Lavin builds towards. The focus switches to the guardian angel, whose background role has almost been overlooked. Her own interests are centred on the sacrifices Veronica should make to achieve her vows; she is a representation of connection with her ward. Poignantly, Lavin depicts the guardian angels as flawed as the nuns, each ‘bragging and boasting about the sacrifices they had to offer up for their clients’ (‘Chamois Gloves’, p. 61). With drooping feathers, Veronica’s angel demonstrates weariness and an inferiority in contrast with the others, but, as an agent of success, at the moment Veronica expresses emotion ‘[s]he was as fresh as a daisy once more’ as she flew to Heaven to

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<sup>141</sup> Margaret Mac Curtain, ‘Towards an Appraisal of the Religious Image of Women’, *The Crane Bag*, 4:1 (1980), 26-30 (p. 30).

offer the sacrifice for her ('Chamois Gloves', p. 64). This deft touch of diversion from the realism of the day is noteworthy.

There are interesting links to an earlier short story by Una Troy entitled 'The Apple' (1942). In this, the main protagonist is Mother Mary Aloysius, an older nun who had been thirty years in the religious order. The story opens with a declaration of passivity: 'She had never used her mind for thinking; only for recording the thoughts of others. She was happy. She had always been happy'.<sup>142</sup> Here also there is the suggestion that Mother Mary has yet to make the full sacrifice demanded of her as a nun. In an episode framed in its simplicity, she revisits her old home on the way to a holiday in Youghal. The rule of the Order had been relaxed by the Bishop and the nuns can now leave the Convent grounds. This is a significant leniency which the Reverend Mother has resisted herself until now when she is forced by the Bishop, for her own health, to take a holiday with four others. Mother Mary is one of those. On their way to Youghal, a coastal resort in County Cork, she is allowed to visit her family home but must not enter into it. She has been given permission to look through the windows by the Reverend Mother but that is all, as she has forsaken that connection when she entered an enclosed order. However, once at the back of the house and finding the door open she makes a conscious decision to enter: "'If I go in' said Mother Mary Aloysius, "it will be a mortal sin." She stood there rigidly. "A mortal sin," said Mother Mary Aloysius firmly, and went in'" ('The Apple', p. 585).

This conscious and deliberate act engages with the turmoil of living apart from her biological family and entering into an artificial construct of kinship through

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<sup>142</sup> Una Troy, 'The Apple', *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, Volume 4, ed. by Angela Bourke et al., (Cork: Cork University Press in association with Field Day, 2002), pp. 582-585 (p. 582). All further references are to this edition, and are given in the text.

the religious order. It challenges her vows of obedience and the tenets of her faith. Like Veronica in 'Chamois Gloves', it is the home that engenders the privilege of independent thought momentarily: here it is Mother Mary's own bedroom that is the culminating site of distance from her beliefs; for Veronica it was the memory of an attic room. In 'The Apple', Troy creates a complex visual compression of the substance of a woman's earlier life. As Mother Mary comes down from her own attic bedroom:

[S]he carried the little room and all that was to be seen from it, safely in her heart. Her heart was so small that was all it could hold; and that fitted exactly into it as the egg to its shell. ('The Apple', p. 585)

The heart, contracted to a diminutive organ and repository of emotion here, suggests that her time in the convent has not developed her capacity for love, whether religious or familial. The precious gift of connection to her home is suppressed within the walls of another organ of life – an eggshell. However, it would not take a great deal to break an eggshell and the contents would be lost, an apt metaphor for what happens next. Mother Mary declares, 'I am in mortal sin [...] My soul is black [...] Black' ('The Apple', p. 585). The colour reference and the use of possessive and personal pronouns indicate a personal crisis. Troy creates a pastoral illusion of continuance in the midst of this crisis, in the semi-rural, near-coastal location of Mother Mary's home, and the stark contrast between that, and the turmoil Mother Mary experiences, shifts the tenor of this story dramatically. Self-awareness comes from entering the home. It is a metaphorical opening of Pandora's Box and as the narrator concludes, 'she did not realize how precious and how terrible was the price she paid for it' ('The Apple', p. 585). This short narrative manages to encompass the

following: an observation of the hierarchy of the Church and its progressive movements, the resistances of individuals towards change (an important connection to the concerns of Lavin's 1940s narratives such as 'The Becker Wives' and 'The Long Ago'), the frailties and weaknesses of people and the coming of age of Mother Mary. Her personal rebellion changes her faith. Unlike Veronica and her guardian angel, both of whom are freed and strengthened by her moment of weakness, Mother Mary enters into a psychological, emotional and religious conflict.

Lavin's references to older forms of storytelling, such as the fable, and to popular culture beliefs and customs, clearly reflects contemporary public knowledge and social understanding of that cultural history in Ireland at the time of publication of her short stories. Lavin's merging of realism and the fabulous is, therefore, a more tangible reflection of what she saw about her. An appreciation of folk narratives and practice was very much evident in Ireland, especially amongst rural communities, but sat alongside desire for economic and social progression as well as established religious belief. Lavin understood these nuances and captured them in a fruitful mix of realist, religious and folklore modes in her fiction. 'The Becker Wives' in particular, captures the fine distinctions and common grounds between these approaches, as Chapter 4 illustrates. However, the most productive readings of her fictions emerge from the perspective of the dominant mode of realism. The following chapter on Lavin's Big House fictions reveals the fullest extent of such readings in connection with Lavin family history.

## Chapter 3

### The Big House Narratives

A photograph held in the Special Collections at UCD shows Mary Lavin and her first husband William Walsh standing outside Bective House, Meath.<sup>1</sup> Lavin is wearing a tweed suit in the mode of the Protestant Ascendancy, a classic weekend outfit for country living. This is an unusual image, in that in later photographs she is almost always dressed in a plain black jumper and black skirt, or black dress: outfits that were simple yet expensive.<sup>2</sup> Lavin had been asked to ‘pen a few words about her late husband, William Walsh’ and the photograph is included in the response. It offers a rare visual insight into the earlier, perhaps upwardly mobile, aspirations of a young Mary Lavin. This association is not fully mapped onto her fictions until her third collection, *The Becker Wives and Other Stories* (1946), although ‘The Cemetery in the Demesne’ (1944) for instance, references a landed estate as a location in the narrative.<sup>3</sup> These echoes of Ascendancy privilege are repeated elsewhere in the fictions. The image of Lavin with her first husband suggests that there was a certain ease with which she engaged with this lifestyle.

Markedly, once Lavin had become better-known to the public, her appearance framed her introduction in some interviews. In an article by Tanis

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<sup>1</sup>The photograph appears in a features article about Lavin’s life entitled ‘William Walsh: A Happy Legacy’, *Meath Macra Na Feirme 1947-1977 celebrates the first 30 years* (Mullingar, Westmeath: Westmeath Examiner Ltd, 1977), p. 4, press cuttings fol. 1: James Joyce Library. Lavin talks of her first husband and his wish that their children would grow up in a rural community ‘on the land’, just as he did.

<sup>2</sup>A photograph by Eddie Kelly of Lavin at a fashion show at Fitzwilliam Square, Dublin, for the Jorgensen collection, evidences her obvious interest in couture clothing: her jumpers were cashmere, her clothing of good quality and she is remembered by interviewers and audience members at her readings for this stylish mode of dress; press cuttings fol. 1: James Joyce Library.

<sup>3</sup>Mary Lavin, ‘The Cemetery in the Demesne’, *The Long Ago and Other Stories* (London: Michael Joseph, 1944).

O’Callaghan, Lavin is noted as being ‘all in black – skirt, blouse, cashmere Jaeger coat – even her handbag’.<sup>4</sup> Whilst visual connection with an author is a common feature in journalism, subsequent released photographs when Lavin is a widow all look similar in composition and content, and do not repeat this earlier reference to country estate living.

To date, readings of Mary Lavin’s fictions have not paid sufficient attention to the Big House narratives as a subset within the body of Lavin’s short stories. One reason may be that there are so few of them in relation to other subsets in her oeuvre. Yet Mary Lavin’s Big House narratives offer insightful observations on the social architecture of the decaying Ascendancy reign in Ireland, whilst at the same time framing a re-evaluation of gender and cultural change within mid-twentieth century Ireland. They are worthy of note as these narratives are part of the broader context of Lavin’s focus on the individual and his or her place in the Irish social domain. The Big House belongs to the ideological realm of Ascendancy history: it resonates with connotations of affluence and control, and in Lavin’s fiction there are various levels of engagement with this subject matter. Notably, her own personal relationship to the Big House was significant enough to alter the composition of her life and work. A crucial extension of these particular fictions is Lavin’s intricate layering of subjects such as inheritance, cultural transmission and social transition onto a particular point in Ascendancy history. In the course of this chapter Lavin’s Big House narratives are read against the backdrop of other Irish writers within the same subject focus. At the same time I argue that Lavin’s marginal connection to a particular kind of Big House, through her father, suggests a particular means of

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<sup>4</sup>Tanis O’Callaghan, ‘I don’t know why I write’, *Evening Press*, Friday 3 November 1972, press cuttings fol. 1: James Joyce Library.

cultural inheritance whereby these key subject matters can be addressed. This is set against her maternal pedigree as daughter of a wealthy shopkeeper. Lavin's father's close links to a family that was part of the wealthy American meritocracy introduced her to an alternative lifestyle; in fact, Tom Lavin's relocation to Ireland and subsequent work experience underpin a reading of Lavin's Big House narratives.

Lavin's Big House narratives are noteworthy because of their fictional distance from the families, and locations, of the middle-class mid-range economy that she knows so well. Where critical appraisal of her work has established an undeniable interest in this middle-class milieu, the Big House provides another realm in which Lavin can explore issues of isolation, restlessness, unhappiness and response to change. Lavin's version of the Big House knowingly references the point of view of servants and other employees: housekeepers, a lawyer, overseers and other below-stairs staff hold key interest for the reader, as their points of view can be read as markers of discontent bound to the margins of a decaying Ascendancy. Lavin's narratives foreground the rituals of futile domesticity that are metaphors for the declining dominant powers of the absent owners; these are embodied in the actions of servants. The frustration of the mid-to-lower classes is played out against a questioning of the old order. Big House narratives do depict such revolts against the establishment but this is usually couched within a longer tradition of inherent respect for authority. In stories such as Lavin's 'The Joy-Ride' and 'Magenta' (1942), there is evidently a new-found confidence at the expense of this older system. A declining control over household staff that was more likely to opt for employment in the town or city, suggests the beginning of a more dispassionate, professional connection between servant and master. Falling interest

in domestic service as a line of work, and the draw of new opportunities through emigration, suggests that servants might have other opportunities to consider.

The biographical connections between Lavin and Ascendancy property such as Bective House are significant. Her father's employment there connected Lavin to the history and politics of Ascendancy Ireland during adolescence and adulthood. Tom Lavin was from Frenchpark, County Roscommon and had emigrated from Ireland to America during the early 1890s. He met his long term employer, Mr Charles S. Bird Senior, early after his arrival in America in the early 1890s and became both an employee and respected lifelong associate. Charles Sumner Bird Jr. purchased Bective with friends in the 1920s, eventually buying out their share. Tom Lavin, who had worked for the Bird family for some time in America, was appointed the estate manager.<sup>5</sup> From this point onwards, Bective was to play a significant role in Mary Lavin's life and to influence her distinguished body of writing. The title of her first collection *Tales from Bective Bridge* (1942) serves as testimony to her allegiances. The opening two paragraphs of 'Say Could that Lad Be I?' alone highlight Meath, Dublin and Roscommon, the county of her father's birth. These locations offer a footprint where she would locate a fictional depiction of her father. The Bird family were already familiar with the demands of running a large estate; their own house Endean, in Walpole, Massachusetts was part of a large development that was forged from a successful dynastic business run since 1803, and later,

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<sup>5</sup> There is some variance in the detail of this purchase: George Briscoe states the property was purchased in 1923. *The Best of Times: Memoirs of a Countryman* (Ireland: Bellinter Bridge Publications, 2005), p. 77. Kevin Mulligan states it was purchased in 1926, in his 'Private History of the Estate', 2006 which was written for the previous owners, the Wymes family. Prior to the Bird's ownership, the Stern family purchased Bective in 1908. Mary Lavin's letter to Ellery Sedgwick dated 30 January 1940 recalls Mr Bird and Tom Lavin meeting again in Ireland when Charles Bird was on a hunting trip: Sedgwick papers, MHS. No date of purchase is given but the decision to purchase was made, according to Lavin, because her father would manage the estate.



through a successful series of paper mills in Walpole. The family employed a large number of the local population.<sup>6</sup> They were social philanthropists, active in politics and keen sportsmen and women.

This American link to Bective is the point of divergence from the traditional Big House ownership model. Yet the early dynastic foundation is a familiar one to Anglo-Irish Big House society, as is the Bird family's continuation of local customs and practices. The Birds, advised to some extent by Lavin's father, retained the estate income with traditional sporting and farming ventures. A successful breeding and racing stock programme was managed by Tom Lavin. Newspaper articles document the successful racing career of Heartbreak Hill, a horse owned by the Bird family and trained by Tom Lavin; his own letters detail other racing successes and Tom Lavin's obituary notes his presence at local shows.<sup>7</sup> Remarkably, during the Civil War Bective House remained intact where other Big Houses were burned down in the area.<sup>8</sup> Caroline Walsh attributes this survival to a 'legacy of good will left by the Boltons which the owners that followed did their best to sustain'.<sup>9</sup> The Boltons built Bective House circa 1850, and were generous in building a Protestant church and donating money to a Catholic church with a school. Nearby Bellinter House, Navan, was also spared. Yet as Walsh notes in her interview with Jack Horan in the

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<sup>6</sup>Deborah Ranaldi, Guy Ciannavei, Barbara Parker, Jeff Mattson and Roberta McCormack, *Images of America: Walpole* [1998] (Portsmouth NH: Arcadia, 2004). The history of the Bird family is written and privately supplied by Elizabeth M. Cottrell, article, 2008, untitled.

<sup>7</sup> *Irish Times*, 4 October 1945, p. 3, press cuttings folder: James Joyce Library. Proquest newspapers: British Library, Colindale [accessed 3 November 2009]. Also, newspaper clippings fol. 12, ML 628: Gotlieb Archive.

<sup>8</sup> Over three hundred Big Houses were burnt down between 1919 and 1923, the majority during the Civil War: Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London: Profile Books, 2005), p. 210.

<sup>9</sup> Caroline Walsh, 'Bective: Once You Belong You Belong', *Irish Times*, 20 June 1978, p. 10: Proquest, British Library [accessed 5 November 2009].

same article, there was ‘Republican activity’ alongside Black and Tan patrols and, therefore a serious risk of attacks on these properties.<sup>10</sup>

Tom Lavin’s letters record life at Bective House. In correspondence with Howard Gotlieb, Mary Lavin talks quite candidly of her father’s letters; she had read them in the past and re-read them before passing them on to him. Ironically, she says that ‘I can never re-read a letter – one has lived in it – best leave it at that I think’, yet her re-reading of her own material for revision connected to new collections is meticulous and careful.<sup>11</sup> However, she does confess to re-reading her father’s letters and says: ‘I think I now believe (because I *did* glance at them) that they have an important place in my biography if its [*sic*] ever written’.<sup>12</sup> This admission of the significance of Tom Lavin’s letters has not been addressed in work on Lavin’s fictions before now. In 1958 Lavin had indeed mooted the idea of an autobiography; she went as far as naming the potential work as ‘My Own Short Story’ to her correspondent; this was just after she applied for a Guggenheim award.<sup>13</sup> Her father’s letters are an important facet of Lavin’s work: they offer empirical evidence that clearly documents a life lived; in turn their content informs both the creative process and content in Lavin’s fictions for a twenty-first century readership.

Lavin was based in Dublin during her father’s employment at Bective House, and was attending the Loreto College Convent School, St Stephen’s Green whilst living with her mother. She spent the weekends in County Meath, making Bective her adopted home to some extent. Nora Lavin disliked the country, and remained in their house in Dublin for the greater period whilst her husband worked in Bective.

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<sup>10</sup> Walsh, ‘Bective: Once You Belong You Belong’, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Letter to Howard Gotlieb from Mary Lavin dated 30 November 1983: Gotlieb Archive.

<sup>12</sup> Letter to Howard Gotlieb from Mary Lavin dated 30 November 1983: Gotlieb Archive.

<sup>13</sup> Letter to Patience dated 18 March 1958, ML 628, box 23, fol. 2: Gotlieb Archive.

This was an arrangement of convenience. In a letter to his employer Tom makes reference to his wife Nora and daughter Mary staying with him:

They are staying with me for three weeks, and we are getting on remarkably well. Maggie O'brien [*sic*] was ordered away by the doctor for three weeks holidays so they had to come down to stay with me.<sup>14</sup>

This letter does reveal there had been some level of estrangement. Leah Levenson recognises a gulf between Tom and Nora Lavin from early in their marriage, citing their different social ambitions. A certain distance grew between them in America and had continued once they returned to Ireland. In an earlier letter Tom Lavin writes that:

Mrs Lavin and Mary was [*sic*] here for a month But [*sic*] now are going Back [*sic*] to dublin [*sic*] as you know it would not worke [*sic*] to have them here now the[y] will come any time I want them.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the apparent tensions, there is evidence held in correspondence that Nora Lavin did spend some time at Bective. It was not a complete or permanent marital separation.

During his stewardship it is evident that Tom Lavin kept his employer fully informed of all aspects of the estate. The letters reveal a proactive engagement with his role, and contain details of the day-to-day running of the estate, clearly demonstrating that Tom Lavin felt great pride in his job. These letters also reveal great personal loneliness and a genuine sense of concern about his employers.

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<sup>14</sup> Letter dated 24 July 1942, ML 628, box 33, fol. 11: Gotlieb Archive. The archives also contain evidence of Tom Lavin's travels to the family in Dublin.

<sup>15</sup> Letter dated 1 April 1941, ML 628, box 33, fol. 11: Gotlieb Archive.

Historian Steven Stowe suggests that ‘most personal texts have a certain open, candid quality which contrasts with the highly conceptualized and self-protective language of more “official” documents’ and indeed Tom Lavin’s correspondence, even that dictated to others, is frank and sometimes so unguarded that it also reveals a great deal about the gaps in his own socialisation with regard to employer-employee relationships.<sup>16</sup> In comparison to stereotypical depictions of the land agent, his time at Bective was marked by careful and responsible guardianship and Lavin observed all this. She also knew of the substance of the letters. Every detail concerning the horses, livestock and upkeep of the property was relayed back to America on a regular basis, sometimes with only days between letters. Everything was documented, from feed bills to maintenance costs, local intelligence and preparations for weekend and hunting parties.

Tom Lavin had left school early and had some difficulty with formal written expression. It was all the more to his credit that he took such great care with the accounts and management of the estate, perhaps taking on more responsibility than normal due to his success in other areas such as the breeding and racing of horses. He sought to forestall any takeover of the property during the emergency years by letting it out temporarily for short periods on a rent-free basis. Tom Lavin advised Bective’s owner:

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<sup>16</sup> Steven Stowe, ‘Making Sense of Letters and Diaries’, Making Sense of Evidence series, *History Matters: The U.S. Survey on the Web* <<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/letters/letters.pdf>> [re-accessed 29 January 2013] (para. 6 of 51).

[n]ow this puts me on very firm [*sic*] footing having Mrs Maud in the house and the naims [*sic*]of Robinson and others as vacues [*sic*] I can[] tell the Government that the house is fulley [*sic*] occupied.<sup>17</sup>

This was not necessarily seen as the best course of action by the Birds and was fairly short lived as far as I can determine. Some reticence can be discerned on the part of his employer in the reply Tom Lavin sent to a cable from Mr Bird. Lavin reiterates the rationale for his intentions in the letter dated 18 April 1941 where he states: ‘[i]t will be a great thing if we can keep Bective going even if we get no rent – there is always a little profit to be gained’.<sup>18</sup>

Tom Lavin maintained other employment links to Walpole; he had served part of his time there as a driver, teamster and volunteer fireman.<sup>19</sup> In a newsletter he invited old work colleagues to stay in a cottage on the estate which he said was ‘all ready for any of them when they want to come [and that a] visit would add ten years to the life of some of [the old timers]’.<sup>20</sup> There is a similar sense of proprietorship in Mary Lavin’s own correspondence: she often writes of Bective with the assumed privileges of ownership, and in one letter to the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* dated 30 January 1940, claims that ‘We have a house in Dublin too but I’m here a lot with my father’.<sup>21</sup> The plural pronoun declares more than a vested interest. In later correspondence to the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* (26 April 1940) she commiserates upon his ill-health and in highlighting the recuperative power of more

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<sup>17</sup> Letter dated 1 April 1941 from Tom Lavin to Mr Bird, ML 628, box 33, fol. 11: Gotlieb Archive.

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Tom Lavin to Mr Bird, ML 628, box 33, fol. 11: Gotlieb Archive.

<sup>19</sup> Town Census Walpole Directory 1906; Resident and Business Directories 1911, 1918; 188<sup>th</sup> and 189<sup>th</sup> Annual Report of the Town Offices of the Town of Walpole years ending 31 December 1911 and 1912: East Walpole Historical Society, Massachusetts, USA.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Tom Lavin Old Timer Sends Us Greetings from the Old Country’, p. 7, unknown publication, press cuttings fol. 1: James Joyce Library.

<sup>21</sup> Letter to Mr Sedgwich [*sic*] dated 30 January 1940, p. 4: MHS.

comfortable American homes, she offers general reflections upon the ugliness of Irish houses which, she says:

(with the exception, of course, and always, of fine old residences like Bective) [*sic*] is something that always keeps me looking out windows. In a small way it was something of this that I tried to express in Lilacs – the way, in Ireland, there is a constant effort to resist the advances of beauty in any form, whether it is a new pattern on a tea-cup or or [*sic*] a minute difference of shading in a coat of yellow paint. I believe that this hurts me more than most people ~~and~~ but also I am able to bear it better, because I believe that it dates back to a time when people in Ireland actually were afraid to show any sign of prosperity, even by a new tea-cup, or a new coat of paint, in case their taxes would have been raised by the absentee landlords [*sic*] vigilant agent.<sup>22</sup>

This letter reveals a number of things: an objective, dispassionate and critical view of an Ireland that Lavin understands; also that Lavin exhibits an artistic sensibility and insecurity that suggests she is left emotionally wounded and yet intellectually able to rationalise a rejection of beauty in favour of a security and practicality conditioned by colonial rule. It is apparent that her keen understanding of that historical climate of fear is shaped by her observations of her father's loyalty towards the Bird family and his own pride in the estate.

Yet a form of cultural neglect can be discerned from Tom Lavin's letters. His repeated requests for feedback from Charles Bird with phrases like 'I don't understand why you don't get my letters'<sup>23</sup> and 'Why don't you write *oftner* [*sic*]'<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Letter to Mr Sedgwich [*sic*] dated 25 April 1940: MHS.

<sup>23</sup>Letter from Tom Lavin to Charles Bird dated 8 January 1938: James Joyce Library.

are complex: they suggest a familiarity between Lavin and Bird born of long-term association, of confidence by his employer in Tom's abilities to manage the estate properly, and yet also imply a cultural insularity on the part of the Bird family who prioritise American business and home affairs over Irish investments and employees. Tom Lavin's insecurity can be read alongside events in 'Scylla and Charybdis' where Cotter, young Pidgie's father, is ill at ease talking to the local teacher about his daughter's future prospects.<sup>25</sup> Cotter's expectations for her do not move beyond the confines of below-stairs work in the House and his advice to his daughter is to remember her place ('Scylla and Charybdis', p. 38). Were similar tensions to Tom Lavin's own experiences at Bective being played out in the fiction? American ownership of the Big House might seem to mute concern about class tensions that may surround the old Anglo-Irish model, yet to some degree one might also ask just how different was the Big House environment under American ownership, at what was a transitional phase of the Big House itself?

Lavin's interest in looking out of windows and her dislike of 'the ugliness of Irish houses' provides a fascinating context for her Big House narratives. The reference to 'Lilacs' in her letter makes it clear that Lavin fully grasps the social and economic forces that have shaped Irish history. Yet there remains an interest in 'beauty', expressed in her fictions in the links between individual identity and the built environment. This beauty may not always be realised: it exists as a metaphor of success and often is placed just out of reach of the protagonists in her short stories. This unfulfilled potential serves as an abstract constraint. In Lavin's fictions, access to the view from a window acts as a deliberate artifice to limit the range of

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<sup>24</sup> Letter from Tom Lavin to Charles Bird dated 18 August 1930: James Joyce Library.

<sup>25</sup> Mary Lavin, 'Scylla and Charybdis', *The Patriot Son and Other Stories* (London: Michael Joseph, 1956), pp. 33-34. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

individuals: in ‘The Joy-Ride’ for instance, windows are closed in each evening with shutters and reopened the next morning, an obviously practical routine. The house is managed by an overseer and servants and their lives are dictated by these routines of temporary release and then confinement each day. We learn that ‘the hall was as dark as a vault [...]. In the back regions the windows were without shutters, protected only by black bars and railings’.<sup>26</sup> Lavin’s use of the negative simile with its connotations of the burial chamber, juxtaposed with the posterior enclosure denied any window furnishings, reinforces the professional and social incarceration of the servants who have no time to admire a view of ‘some 400 acres of the best land in Meath’ (‘The Joy-Ride’, p. 79). It is the deliberate disturbance of this routine that empowers Purdy, the old butler, to strike out against his own confined way of life. Whilst the actual promise of the outside world is suggested in this boundary motif, where the perspective beyond the window-frame can be viewed each day, it is managed internally. By contrast, in ‘Magenta’ shutters are only opened by the maids to air the house in good weather, not as part of a daily routine: that contributes to an even denser picture of a declining estate, signifying entrapment and claustrophobia in those who remain there.<sup>27</sup> Young Magenta, who does the heavy work, is a herdsman’s daughter, ruddy-cheeked, healthy and ambitiously forward-looking; her alliance with life exterior to the house encourages the possibility of a sense of progression. The well-run estate of ‘The Joy-Ride’ contrasts with the interior decay of the house in ‘Magenta’, but the Park in the latter tale is well-maintained by a gardener: laurel trees grow profusely, young bullocks graze and the presence of

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<sup>26</sup> Mary Lavin, ‘The Joy-Ride’, *The Becker Wives and Other Stories* (London: Michael Joseph, 1946), p. 82. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>27</sup> Mary Lavin, ‘Magenta’, *The Becker Wives and Other Stories* (London: Michael Joseph, 1946). All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.



poachers suggests abundant wildlife. The history of cultivated and cared for demesnes is referenced in both narratives. Again, it is the world outside the windows which holds promise.

It is also possible to see this forward-looking scrutiny in other stories elsewhere in Lavin's collections. However, those fictions that are located within a working or middle-class domain often depict challenge and failure bound up within the boundary motif. The widow in 'The Cuckoo-Spit' stands by an open window after her encounter with a young man: it is as if the window frames a new episode in her life outside of the home and memories of her deceased husband.<sup>28</sup> The age difference between the two protagonists and implied social censure mean, however, that this promise will never be realised. 'The Cuckoo-Spit' is indeed a narrative of thwarted ambition. In 'Lilacs', the youngest daughter views the outside world with mixed feelings: again a window frames the potential of that world, but the daughter is trapped by the reality of a farmyard dominated by a dung heap, the main source of income for the family. The open window lets in a terrible odour that makes the daughter ill; she cannot see beyond her imagined idyll of a lilac-framed exterior and so again the promise of an imagined better place is not realised. Lavin's earlier comments on the psychological limitations of a nation more used to the practicalities of living, contextualised within an atmosphere of drudgery and decay, rather than artistic considerations, suggests a link between personal and national failure and this is articulated in 'Lilacs'. There are also subtle connotations of colonial control expressed in 'Lilacs', as well as deft links between the endeavours of the artist and the lack of appreciation of those endeavours by individuals. The pain that Lavin

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<sup>28</sup> Mary Lavin, 'The Cuckoo-Spit', *In the Middle of the Fields and Other Stories* (London: Constable, 1967). All further references are to this edition.

expresses in her correspondence is evident here but Lavin's pragmatic rationalisation is only partially realised, and only through the older members of the Molloy family.

As an adult Mary Lavin also lived in Dublin with her first husband (a practising solicitor) but continued to spend weekends at Bective with her father, until his death in September 1945. The pattern of her estate experience developed into more direct contact with the practicalities of management during her father's long illness. Lavin collated estate information, to report back to the Bird family, on behalf of her father, Tom. In a detailed letter during the time of his illness, Lavin seeks to reassure the Bird family that the estate is being managed properly in her father's absence, identifying, as she says, 'how I have employed the time with regard to your concerns'.<sup>29</sup> The letter reveals an underlying insecurity about the effect her father's illness may have on the relationship between himself and his employer: Lavin is keen to point out that '[t]he work on the land is something that my father was able to direct after the first few days of his illness' and she points out that she 'keep[s] an eye on the progress of [...] such other jobs as the ditch-clearing, garden preparations, and other odd work that is influenced by the weather'.<sup>30</sup> In that extended letter to Charles and Julia Bird, Mary catalogues a vast array of maintenance tasks in the estate grounds and within the house that she and her father had undertaken.<sup>31</sup> She had a detailed understanding of these tasks and responsibilities: these included her role as supervisor to garden and indoor staff, managing outdoor work such as ditch-clearing and spreading manure, as well as compiling inventories of linen, fabrics,

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<sup>29</sup> Letter from Mary Lavin to Mr and Mrs Charles Bird dated 10 February 1945, ML 628: Gotlieb Archive.

<sup>30</sup> Letter from Mary Lavin to Mr and Mrs Charles Bird dated 10 February 1945, ML 628: Gotlieb Archive.

<sup>31</sup> Letter from Mary Lavin to Mr and Mrs Charles Bird dated 10 February 1945, ML 628: Gotlieb Archive.

furniture, silver, and china items. Undeniably, this comprehensive knowledge establishes a formal sense of realism in her work, and this estate knowledge maps onto wider group experiences.

After their marriage, Mary Lavin and her husband had stayed in a wing of the main house at Bective, as well as in Dublin. She became even more involved in Bective affairs, later supporting her husband William, who took over managing the affairs of the estate after the death of Tom Lavin.<sup>32</sup> When she inherited a sum of money from her father she used it to purchase land close to Bective House; on this she had built their new home, Abbey Farm.<sup>33</sup> A letter from Charles Bird in 1946 refers both to the preparations and outcome of their move to Bective, as well as information concerning equities that Tom Lavin had held that were now hers to invest as she wished.<sup>34</sup> These equities, he suggests:

[I]f you wanted to could be disposed of and would give you sufficient cash to pay for your acquisition of the ~~lawn~~ [sic] long abbey field. I always admired this field and ~~that~~ [sic] the stretch of the river and the old Abbey.<sup>35</sup>

Lavin refers to this purchase in an article:

The farm was then only one big field with broken fences and overgrown hedge but, like an island, it was almost encircled by the river Boyne and the

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<sup>32</sup> Letter from William Walsh to Mr and Mrs Charles Bird dated 2 February 1946, fol. 23: James Joyce Library.

<sup>33</sup> William had written to Charles Bird hoping that there were no objections to them purchasing the land as Mr Bird had been interested in it. Letter from William Walsh to Charles Bird dated 24 February 1946, fol. 23: James Joyce Library.

<sup>34</sup> These assets were liquidated as confirmed by C. Bird in a letter dated 12 December 1946, and a letter from the State Trust Company, Boston Massachusetts dated 11 December 1946 confirms net profit, ML 628: Gotlieb Archive.

<sup>35</sup> Letter from C. Bird to Mary Lavin dated 24 June 1946, ML 628, box 33, fol. 2: Gotlieb Archive.

ancient Cistercian Abbey, rose up like a rock in the middle of it. We loved it and we built a small cottage down by the river.<sup>36</sup>

Building a home within such close proximity to the large Bective estate she had known so well reveals the enormous early influence that Bective and the surrounding landscape had over her. In a newspaper article entitled ‘A Woman’s Love of Land’, Lavin expands on her first sighting of the abbey land when she was with her husband William. Here, a more literary account emerges:

In the depths of this farm, like an island, like a rock, was the old abbey, washed around by the tumultuous waves of the great Meath grasses. And before spring had whitened the thorn bushes and the crab trees had blown pink, somehow we had overcome all obstacles and that farm was ours.<sup>37</sup>

These depictions provide a provenance for the later widow stories ‘In the Middle of the Fields’ and ‘The Cuckoo-Spit’.<sup>38</sup> The opening of the former short story reads almost as a redaction of the above: ‘Like a rock in the sea, she was islanded by fields, the heavy grass washing about the house, and the cattle wading in it as in water’ (‘In the Middle of the Fields’, p. 9). The ‘obstacles’ that Lavin spoke of in her own purchase, and clearing of land for the family home are transposed onto the fictional world in the rural landscape narratives.

Connecting the family correspondence to the short stories in this way raises a number of key questions. One might ask whose memories actually emerge on the

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<sup>36</sup> ‘William Walsh A Happy Legacy’, *Meath Macra Na Feirme*, p. 4, press cuttings fol. 1: James Joyce Library.

<sup>37</sup> This newspaper article is not identified by source or date in archives. Here Lavin makes reference to her husband’s death three years prior to the article and so it could have been written and published 1957/1958; ‘A Woman’s Love of Land’, press cuttings fol. 1: James Joyce Library.

<sup>38</sup> Mary Lavin, ‘In the Middle of the Fields’ and ‘The Cuckoo-Spit’, *In the Middle of the Fields*. All further references to the former are given in the text.

page; hers or her father's? How are these memories and experiences manifested in her short stories? How successful are Lavin's short stories as a method of translating stored memories into the substance of fiction? This route of enquiry already highlights shifting clusters of interest: primarily to what extent various auto/biographical experiences inform the fictions, what literary methodologies are in place to store memories and experiences and do they work? Are the fictions imparting specific knowledge to the reader? There is evidence the letters do map a community network that extends across from Ireland to America. They serve to situate relationships and events within a particular time-frame. The letters also straddle private and public domains, merging personal and professional interests. However, they are not directly translated to short stories driven by epistolary structure and content, rather their substance referentially sheds light on Lavin's fictional representation of Ireland. Taking those translated experiences into account, another significant line of enquiry involves asking, to what extent are these narratives producing a revisionary view of the Big House environment?

Lavin's Big House narratives do go some way towards addressing key characteristics of the tradition normalised in the novel form. Vera Kreilkamp foregrounds these as follows: the deterioration of the house as a symbolic reference to a failing social class; the breakdown of family lineage and subsequent loss of estate ownership; the disreputable or incompetent absent landlord; and finally, an outsider who eventually takes possession of the estate.<sup>39</sup> Kreilkamp also highlights 'a deeply ironic and, for the most part, unsentimental vision of gentry life as the

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<sup>39</sup> Vera Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1998), pp. 20-24.

ascendancy world moves towards collapse'.<sup>40</sup> Lavin's connection to the tradition is through the short story, the first point of departure from a genre-related Big House tradition, although she is not alone in that. Her observations of a declining house and household in 'Magenta' do foreshadow an eventual change of ownership; 'A Memory' updates the estate changeover to accommodate the modern developer in its narrative. 'The Joy-Ride' already has an agent clearly ambitious to own the property, while 'Scylla and Charybdis' marks but does not mourn a 'vision' of an outdated mode of life. Lavin's depiction of the condition is unsentimental and ironic, in keeping with the Big House tradition Kreilkamp notes. More than that, Lavin's stories suggest the intervention of modernity into an already dated context and a shift in cultural acceptance of that part of Irish history. In 1940 Elizabeth Bowen suggests that '[n]ew democratic Ireland no longer denounces the big house, but seems to marvel at it'.<sup>41</sup> As will be made evident later in this chapter, a reading public might choose to read Big House fictions as part of a trend towards nostalgia literature. Bowen's familial links undeniably colour her impressions, but they are valid.

In Lavin's case, correspondence between herself and her father Tom does inform her Big House fiction. The environments that Lavin fictionalises are imbued with a sense of detail drawn from Lavin's engagement with the Bird family and Bective. For example, the very ordinariness of being the daughter of a man who managed the Estate and yet only existing on the fringe of a certain lifestyle, is well depicted in her story 'Scylla and Charybdis'. The distance between the family of the house and the servants is manifested unmistakably in simple location determiners: the 'darkness and cold' of below stairs and the warmth and light of above stairs

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<sup>40</sup> Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel*, p. 21.

<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, 'The Big House', *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*, ed. by Hermione Lee (London: Virago Press, 1986), pp. 25-30 (p. 28).

signify the experiential gap between occupants ('Scylla and Charybdis', p. 36). Lavin clearly understands the protocols of Big Houses and the uneasy alliances in place historically between servants and employers. However, the short stories also realign our perception of what Big House living means in the twentieth century and are especially valuable when placed against the memories of the owners of similar Big Houses and their acquaintances. For example, George Briscoe's memoirs of his family home nearby in Bellinter House, Navan, County Meath and his own time at Bective House after Tom Lavin's stewardship offer a different perspective, one more in keeping with the Naylor's of Elizabeth Bowen's fiction.<sup>42</sup> Recollections of a visit Ellinor Stewart Heiser made with Anna Bird to Bective House in 1937 offer an American portrait of the property.<sup>43</sup> Mrs Bird was visiting her son, Charles and his wife Julia, and Ellinor was her companion and friend. Briscoe says 'Bective was kept immaculately' under Tom Lavin and Stewart Heiser talks of Tom Lavin's 'care' at Bective in conjunction with the hospitality of the Birds, presenting 'a picture of perfect country life'.<sup>44</sup> Tom Lavin's granddaughter Caroline Walsh recalls her own equally pleasant memories of her time at Bective. Writing in the *Irish Times* about the time of the sale of Bective in 2006, she places it within the realm of a biblical paradise, 'a lost Eden'; that was the legacy of Tom Lavin's stewardship.<sup>45</sup> Such plentiful praise again belies the hardships and anxieties expressed in both Tom and Mary Lavin's correspondence. The concerns Tom Lavin expressed in his letters are not evident to others.

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<sup>42</sup> Briscoe, *The Best of Times: Memoirs of a Countryman*, pp. 2-7 usefully offers an insight into the infrastructure and upkeep of a large country house at the time. Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September* [1929; 1942] (London: Penguin Books, 1983).

<sup>43</sup> Ellinor Stewart Heiser, *A New Englander* (Private Publication circa 1944), pp. 91-101.

<sup>44</sup> Briscoe, *The Best of Times*, p. 78; Heiser, *A New Englander*, p. 97.

<sup>45</sup> Caroline Walsh, 'My Lost Eden of Bluebells, Daffodils and Woodland Walks by the Boyne', *Irish Times*, 20 April 2006 <<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/property/2006/0420/>> [accessed 26 April 2008] (para. 1 of 9).

The Big House environment for Tom Lavin was an extension of the work relationship he already had with the Bird family. In contrast, Lavin's own experiences as an adolescent and later as an adult involved with the running of the estate may appear to have little to do with any historical legacy of the Big House. Nevertheless, as an intellectual revisiting her childhood in her writing, she would surely have been conscious of the enormity of that legacy and critically appraised her place within it. Consequently, these Big House narratives are uniquely positioned both to complement the greater body of work that deals with the shopkeepers, farmers and middle-class, and to elucidate the social changes of which she was a part.

Lavin's place in Bective House is remembered by James Stern, an Irish writer who also lived in Bective House as a child. According to Kevin Mulligan, Stern's family took over Bective House in 1908 and remained until after the Irish Civil War; they finally sold the property in 1926 to Charles and Julia Bird. His parents were keen equestrians and Meath was a popular location for hunting. Stern was sent away to school and had a fairly lonely existence at Bective when home. He wrote of his family leaving his childhood home for the last time:

A Mr Lavin had arrived to take care of the place while the new owner was preparing to move in [...]. Did it really happen, or did I dream that on the day we drove away I dared to look back, and there, framed in the front doorway, stood a girl of maybe ten?<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> James Stern 'Home Thoughts', quoted in Leah Levenson, *The Four Seasons of Mary Lavin*, (Dublin: Marino Books, 1998), p. 38. However, Caroline Walsh states in her article entitled 'Bective: Once You Belong You Belong', *Irish Times*, 20 June 1978, p. 10, that James Stern was born there, which would have made the date of purchase by Stern's parents of Bective House 1903.



That recollection of events in 1926 is of Stern's first sighting of Mary Lavin.<sup>47</sup> Their shared experience of the Bective Estate as a site of his formative years and her adolescence are complicated by very different memories, however; his were of a difficult childhood, while Lavin, as has been demonstrated, had great affection for the place. Lavin appears to be anchored by a broad range of physical, geographical, emotional and intellectual ties throughout the spectrum of her work, as evidenced in the narratives surrounding Dublin and Meath. There are further gradations in the more complex familial resonances particularly influenced by Athenry and Bective. No one location dominates in the collection as a whole but County Meath undoubtedly had a great impact upon Lavin.

### **Lavin in the wider context of Big House Fiction**

Big Houses and their inscription in literature are an important aspect of Irish social and cultural history. Such houses symbolise the discord of the past within the fictions of the present. Divisions in Irish history and politics are reflected, for instance, in the Big House fictions of Maria Edgeworth, Edith Somerville and Violet Martin Ross, Molly Keane and Elizabeth Bowen. The insights afforded by their personal links to Ascendancy Ireland ensure that their fictional representations of the Big House are well documented. Although few remaining Ascendancy houses are intact as family homes, they have longevity in the fictions produced in their wake.<sup>48</sup> These properties are as varied as the narratives they prompt. At the lower end of the social scale, a property such as Kate O'Brien's old family home lives on obliquely,

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<sup>47</sup> Both he and his wife Tanya later became correspondents of Lavin's over many years, and Stern reviewed her work. The British Library in London houses a collection of letters.

<sup>48</sup> The decline of these properties and their alternative uses are discussed in a series of essays in Jacqueline Genet, *The Big House in Ireland Reality and Representation* (Dingle, Co Kerry: Brandon Books, 1991).

and in slightly grander form, in her novel *Without My Cloak* (1931). The O'Briens' home, Boru House, stood intact only sixteen years ago, then fell into ruin and only in 2012 was bought with the possibility of restoring it to house a writers' museum.<sup>49</sup> In *Without My Cloak*, O'Brien's panoramic family saga, it is not the Protestant Ascendancy who are represented but rather a 'new Catholic Big House who survived the famine', where O'Brien's characters inhabit *le nouveau monde* of affluence in the upper-middle classes.<sup>50</sup> This is reminiscent of the O'Brien family history. On a grander scale, the loss of Elizabeth Bowen's family seat is well-documented by Victoria Glendinning, Hermione Lee and Heather Bryant Jordan.<sup>51</sup> The house and demesne that Bowen immortalised in *Bowen's Court* (1942) was knocked down in 1960. Of course, this charting of the demise of any family residence of any size is significant. Nevertheless, Lavin's more fragile yet equally valuable connections to this milieu deserve particular recognition. Brazeel (precursor to Bective House), was burnt down circa 1810, and the property rebuilt from Bective Lodge circa 1836.<sup>52</sup> Its provenance within the Big House history is on record, and Lavin's close connection to it through her father's employment is significant. Unfortunately, the house where Lavin was born in Massachusetts, behind the Bird Estate, also was prey to developers

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<sup>49</sup> Maria Hobbins, 'New Owner Tells of Plans for Kate O'Brien's Ancestral Home', *Limerick Post*, 3 March 2012, p. 2 News <<http://www.limerickcity.ie/media/Boru%20%2019.pdf>> [accessed 26 January 2013].

<sup>50</sup> Adele Dalsimer, *Kate O'Brien: A Critical Study* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990), p. xii. Kate O'Brien's own household Boru House had stables and paddocks that her grandfather had built. He came to Limerick following eviction and established a successful stud farm and later Kate's father Tom joined the business. See Lorna Reynolds, *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait* (Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe, 1987), pp. 21-22.

<sup>51</sup> Victoria Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer* [1977] (London: Phoenix, 1993), p. 4; Hermione Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen* (1981) (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 17; Heather Bryant Jordan, *How Will the Heart Endure: Elizabeth Bowen and the Landscape of War* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 181.

<sup>52</sup> Kevin Mulligan, 'Bective Abbey: County Meath', 2006; a private history of the estate, unpublished.

who feared other interested parties getting control of the land, and it was demolished in 2001. Nothing new has been built on the site to date.<sup>53</sup>

The first critical acknowledgement of Tom Lavin's background interjecting into the focus of the stories is made briefly by Zack Bowen.<sup>54</sup> He conjectures that Pidgie from 'Scylla and Charybdis' must be very similar to a young Mary Lavin, adding:

It is safe to surmise that much of Lavin's preoccupation with servants and social class strictures probably originated in her mother's sense of Tom Lavin's lowered social status, despite the fact that he was later moderately successful as manager of the Bird estate.<sup>55</sup>

However, this is his only reference to Bective; Bowen offers this merely as a foil to Nora Lavin's pretentious outlook as the daughter of a lower-middle-class shopkeeper.

Richard Peterson's study is the most comprehensive overview of Lavin's work to date. Peterson recognises how Bective was one of the early influences in her life, and he reiterates the tensions between Nora and Tom Lavin, adding Nora Lavin felt that 'her husband's work forced her to associate with people who were her social inferiors'.<sup>56</sup> In *Mary Lavin: Quiet Rebel*, Angeline Kelly highlights a number of short stories where Lavin's 'acute awareness of social class is [...] a faithful reportage of attitudes commonly held at the time when events in the story take

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<sup>53</sup> Joanne Damish, 'The Yellow House Has Been Demolished', *Walpole Times*, 2 February 2001 <[http://www.walpoletimes.com/library/yellow\\_house.htm](http://www.walpoletimes.com/library/yellow_house.htm)> [accessed 2008; hard copy held].

<sup>54</sup> Zack Bowen, *Mary Lavin* (London: Associated University Presses, 1975; Lewisburg, USA: Bucknell University Press, 1975).

<sup>55</sup> Bowen, *Mary Lavin*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>56</sup> Richard Peterson, *Mary Lavin*, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), p. 17.

place'.<sup>57</sup> Kelly notes that this can refer not only to the common practices of servants in the lower- and middle-class homes, as evidenced in many of her stories, but also refers to what Kelly suggests (in a reflection on Bowen's observations) as a "'caste' system [that] forms part of the normal social scene'; this is, as is evident in my research, based well within Mary Lavin's realm of experience.<sup>58</sup> Kelly usefully reminds us that Lavin's 'attention to snobberies of class and social pretension implies that as an accurate social commentator she finds twentieth-century society preoccupied with the material and the actual'.<sup>59</sup> This is vitally important in terms of the reception of her work. However, Kelly's approach largely ignores Lavin's own biographical connections to the very class system she writes about so well; the impact that Tom Lavin's links to Bective House had on Mary Lavin's fictions is neglected.

These social categories and tensions surrounding the boundaries of employer-employee relationships, and Lavin's own position as daughter of the estate manager, are imaginatively recreated, as previously suggested, in a late 1950s' short story 'Scylla and Charybdis', which offers some insight into the aspirations of a lonely servant's child. This narrative only appears in one collection, *The Patriot Son*, and is one of Lavin's key Big House narratives. Here a fourteen-year-old named Pidgie hovers on the margins of Big House living; she is liked by staff but unrecognised in the main by the young ladies of the household. Pidgie is destined to join the ranks of the below-stairs staff once she leaves school. However, her aim is to be 'a lady', and Pidgie enters into a quasi-apprenticeship by stealthily observing the young ladies of the household with the aim of assimilating into the role at some point. One day she

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<sup>57</sup> A. A. Kelly, *Mary Lavin: Quiet Rebel* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1980), p. 28.

<sup>58</sup> Kelly, *Mary Lavin: Quiet Rebel*, p. 28.

<sup>59</sup> Kelly, *Mary Lavin: Quiet Rebel*, p. 45.

is drawn into the tennis match the young ladies are playing, to act as ball girl. From then on during the summer she accompanies them on excursions, revelling in her new role as ‘friend’. Pidgie’s enthusiastic assumption that she has entered into a realm where she truly belongs is manifested in fantasies, where Miss Gloria would ask her father to release her into their care ‘to have her become really one of us – like a sister!’ (‘Scylla and Charybdis’, p. 39). She daydreams of having a room at the front of ‘The House’ and explaining her good fortune to the other staff: ‘She for her part, was resolved to be very kind to them and not abuse her new position’ (‘Scylla and Charybdis’, p. 39). The story cannot end like this, however; Lavin’s narrative shapes a potential move for Pidgie, anticipating a transition from servant to lady, only abruptly to undercut the dream. Her father reminds her:

[Y]ou know very well that they wouldn’t bring you in to eat with them! [...] You may not have noticed it, but that’s one thing the like of Those People never will do, and that is eat with their Lessers. Anything but eat with them! Even Mr Sims, the lawyer, gets his meals on a tray in the library. (‘Scylla and Charybdis’, p. 38)

And so it is proved as Pidgie’s imagined social elevation remains unfulfilled. Pidgie’s youthful naivety is tested when, after a day’s outing, she is privileged to be allowed to share the food left out for the family on their return, but directed from the dining room to eat elsewhere. The narrator does not dwell on the immediate aftermath of her exclusion, instead directing us towards the events of the following day:

What really mattered took place next day. And it was a small thing: just like not going for a walk with the maids. But just as she had evaded that Scylla so

now she was preparing to defy Charybdis. And when the young ladies appeared on the terrace, although she was there as usual to peer at them between the pointed laurel leaves, Pidgie's little pink tongue was stuck out at them: as far as it would go. 'Scylla and Charybdis', p. 43)

The reader is reminded that this is, after all, a young child who has been hurt; her comical response is instinctive not measured, and focus on her diminutive status and lack of power is obliquely connoted in the pre-modifiers 'little pink' before the noun 'tongue'. It is this fine attention to detail that serves Lavin's fictions so well.

The significance of the story's title is somewhat overplayed by Lavin's depiction of the mythological monstrous female in the forms of gentrified conservatism and inverted snobbery. Scylla can be read as the walk with the maids, Charybdis as the antagonism towards the mistresses. However, if Lavin is imparting experiential insight to the reader, reference to older forms of narrative, as opposed to the relatively newer form of the short story, however oblique, adds gravitas to her depiction of the Big House environment. Young Pidgie's private cravings for promotion to life above stairs are indeed stunted by social marginalisation, while her adolescent epiphany engenders a reaffirmation of above-below stairs division.<sup>60</sup> This restorative history in the form of mythological reference within the fiction still acknowledges a gap between the various inhabitants of this community, reinforcing imbalances in authority and wealth. As such, 'Scylla and Charybdis' might usefully be read as a representation of an early twentieth-century transition phase for Ascendancy properties and associated in-house staff. Signals of resistance, aspiration and a momentary blurring of boundaries are evident in the fiction

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<sup>60</sup> Peterson, *Mary Lavin*, p. 87.

alongside traditional expectations of Big House narratives. For example, throughout ‘Scylla and Charybdis’ architectural conventions are observed for those familiar with literary depictions of the Big House genre: there are landscaped gardens and a drive, and the lower-level topography of the kitchen and servants’ hall is set against the upper landscape of the dining-room arrangements of damask, glass and silverware. These astute observations of structure and content reference Lavin’s own knowledge of and participation in the management of Bective during her father’s illness in 1945. Her catalogue of the state of Bective’s contents sent to Mr and Mrs Bird gives some insight into the practicality of upkeep of such an estate and the range of responsibilities her father had and this is played out, to some extent, in the short story.<sup>61</sup>

‘Scylla and Charybdis’ suggests the enormity of the task Lavin undertook in condensing and reshaping the Ascendancy narrative. Despite the restrictions of the form of the short story, and the breadth of documented historical subject-matter on the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, Lavin eloquently uses the short story to chart a stage in the decline of Big House authority. In contrast to Elizabeth Bowen’s novel *The Last September* (1929), which exemplifies a wider insularity of the Protestant milieu, and clearly shows the gap between the plight of landed families and the greater population, ‘Scylla and Charybdis’ responds to the personal concerns of a young child and her father.<sup>62</sup> The more obvious matriarchal stronghold of the Big House, a subject that M. J. Farrell explores in her novels, for instance, is not foregrounded here, and so it is Lavin’s relationship between herself and her father Tom that can be extrapolated from the fiction, without reference to her mother Nora. Bowen’s novel

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<sup>61</sup> Letter to Mr and Mrs Bird dated 10 February 1945, ML 628: Gotlieb Archive.

<sup>62</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September* [1929; 1942] (London: Penguin Books, 1983).

contrasts well with Lavin's tactical approach to the Big House genre. In *The Last September*, the barbed and selfish hostess Lady Naylor embodies the worst traits of the moneyed class. In Lavin's short story, there is a more measured recognition of *in absentia* ownership.

Lavin's short stories complement Big House novels such as M. J. Farrell's *Full House* (1935), *The Rising Tide* (1937) and *Two Days in Aragon* (1941) in creating a layered environment of decline. Farrell and Lavin do share an interest in establishing lineage. One significant feature of Farrell's *Full House* is its attention to blood lines and the fear of tainting legitimate family inheritance, issues which Lavin explores in 'The Becker Wives'.<sup>63</sup> A later story by Lavin, 'The Mock Auction', also explores the subject matters of property ownership and lawful claims to family legacy, and sits well alongside other narratives of Ascendancy transition.<sup>64</sup> Lady Olivia Bird in *Full House* has had romantic escapades in the past and we find out that Sheena, her daughter, is not actually her husband's child. This is not revealed until towards the end of the novel. The fact that Sheena is someone else's daughter might seem to offer her the possibility of retrieving the seemingly doomed relationship between her fiancé Rupert and herself. However, Rupert's family home, Owenstown, some 35 miles from Silverue, belongs to an aunt and uncle and is decrepit and mouldering. Rupert's sisters exhibit traits of instability: their inward decline mirrors the outward decline of the family seat. The signifiers of decaying landscape and unsound minds already suggest a warped future that lacks potential; it could be argued that it might not be a good idea to conclude the dynasties of Silverue and Owenstown after all. Bravely, Rupert's sisters Kirsty and Silene go so far as to

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<sup>63</sup> M. J. Farrell, *Full House* [1935] (London: Virago Press, 1986).

<sup>64</sup> Mary Lavin, 'The Mock Auction', *In the Middle of the Fields and Other Stories* (London: Constable, 1967).



warn Sheena against marrying Rupert as the history of both families is blighted by mental instability.

Farrell's themes are strikingly reminiscent of Lavin's 'The Becker Wives', published eleven years later. Lavin might be seen to update the significance of bloodline in the novella, shifting the focus from landed families to the new merchant class. Yet the same uncertainties and snobberies exist. Imperfection is noted. In 'The Becker Wives' the protagonist, Flora, a newcomer to the family, epitomises a flawed inheritance. Her instability is not immediately apparent: initially she is seen as artistic and modern, and she proves dangerously attractive to the balanced, predictable Becker family. The revelations about her psychological volatility only come towards the end of the novella, yet the potential to destabilise the apparently unblemished core family unit is suggested.

Other correlations are evident between Farrell's and Lavin's fictions: the illegitimacy of *Two Days in Aragon* can be read in parallel to a sense of sterility in Lavin's 'The Joy-Ride'. Lavin's 'Magenta' also experiments with a sense of display and growth in the figure of the young servant girl Magenta, and that responds to a systemic fertility in *Two Days in Aragon*.<sup>65</sup> These stories also address fundamental concerns of class, pedigree and inheritance. The wider realm of workers' farmsteads, illegitimate births and hushed-up relationships between master and servant played out in Farrell's novel is embodied in the metaphorical careless sexuality of the servant dressed in her employer's clothes in Lavin's 'Magenta'. In 'The Joy-Ride' and 'Magenta' the male and female servants are mostly single, and the growth stems from exterior natural overabundance rather than an interior dynasty forming. Of

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<sup>65</sup> M. J. Farrell, *Two Days in Aragon* [1941] (London: Virago Press, 1987).

course the focus is on the stewards, housekeepers and servants who offer us insight, rather than the property owners, but the interplay is worthy of note for the purpose of examination of the two genres. In *Two Days of Aragon* the figure of Nan O'Neill offers echoes of Shibby Pindy (Isabella Prendeville) of *The Big House of Inver*.<sup>66</sup> Both make obsessive claims on the property, its contents and certain individuals and are linked by illegitimate blood claim to the Big House family. In the contemporary English novel, *Rebecca*, another fictional housekeeper, Mrs Danvers, offers the same obsessive connection with property ownership and class status, but this is within an English country home and relates primarily to Mrs Danvers' passionate devotion to her former mistress.<sup>67</sup> It could be argued that Lavin is less concerned with this focus on female control, but makes a case instead for an alternative focus on male stewardship in 'The Joy-Ride' and 'Scylla and Charybdis' that connects with her father's role at Bective. This also links Lavin directly back to earlier Big House fictions such as *Castle Rackrent*. It is only in 'Magenta' that a lower level of female control is evident in the guardians of the house, Miss Perks and Miss Budd.

Claire Norris recognises that '[t]he motif of the deteriorating Big House and its society recurs throughout Irish fiction, appearing even in Irish short stories'.<sup>68</sup> Norris' distinction between genres suggests surprise, yet Lavin's stories consciously re-evaluate expectations surrounding the Big House narrative. Norris offers Lavin's short story 'A Memory' as part of this revision of the landscape of Big House writing; however, she limits her focus to a short episode towards the end of the story in which the protagonist James, mistaking his bearings when alighting too early from

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<sup>66</sup> E. Somerville and M. Ross, *The Big House of Inver* [1925] (London: Mandarin Paperbacks, 1995).

<sup>67</sup> Daphne Du Maurier, *Rebecca* [1938] (London: Virago Press, 2009).

<sup>68</sup> Claire Norris, 'The Big House: Space, Place and Identity in Irish Fiction' in *New Hibernia Review*, 8:1 (Spring 2004), 107-121 (p. 115) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20557910>> [accessed 06/10/2010].

a Cavan bus home, takes a short cut into the Asigh estate, now owned by a past lover of his and her family.<sup>69</sup> In the final few pages of the story, James unsuccessfully battles the unruly vegetation of the overgrown estate as he replays his emotional history in his mind, blaming the two women he had ever cared for both for his loneliness and isolation.

In the course of a very brief discussion on Lavin, Norris focuses on the death of James in the ‘rotted leaves [that] were sucked into his mouth’, stating that ‘[d]eath and decay surround the Big House, as it no longer reigns strong’.<sup>70</sup> The metaphorical immersion or drowning of this protagonist is undoubtedly a powerful closing statement, but the estate and its house really only serve as a foil to the narrative of the selfish academic. His wanderings that day through Dublin offer a better glimpse of isolation and rejection; James believes he is in control of his life but cannot access emotional or physical needs as others do. He has retreated to live in the country and often feels adrift from city life, and a series of encounters with his lover, a porter and a bus conductor prove that. However, the interconnectedness of the country estate, the urban landscape and James’ own life is problematic. It distracts from a straightforward reading of his death as the disenfranchised loner within the city landscape: he does not die on the city streets, with his mistress or at the university or National Library; rather he is abandoned in the soon-to-be-renovated landscape of the Big House. Ironically, he is misplaced at the end of his life; his death is located at the cusp of change, a change he was never able to accommodate.

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<sup>69</sup> Mary Lavin, ‘A Memory’, *A Memory and Other Stories* (London: Constable, 1972). All further references are to this edition unless otherwise stated and are given in the text.

<sup>70</sup> Norris, ‘The Big House’, p. 116.

As a grand gesture locating his final moments within a declining landscape, Lavin places the inept academic and estranged heritage together. This is not the most obvious or satisfying of Lavin's Big House narratives though, and neither does it reflect the more personal insights Lavin so clearly had into that life. The focus is instead on the city, yet the evolution and dynamism of the metropolis is something with which James is now out of touch. Ironically, he has also forgotten the older landscape of the now soon-to-be renovated Asigh estate. Yet reading 'A Memory' as part of the Big House collection shows that the estate manages to survive and adapt in some form where James does not. The focus is not on renewal of the past; rather the story prioritises the dissolution of power in the present.

'The Joy-Ride' and 'Magenta' suggest the diminished nature of the social life of the Big House, and the dichotomy of moving on from the faded grandeur of the past to the liberation of a newer, more modern existence. Consequently, the framing of these narratives within the short story format is notable, as evident constraints of the genre do not easily support the temporality of dynastic decay. This is writing of some distinction. 'The Joy-Ride' manages the hierarchy of absent owner, overseer, two butlers and servants in a faithful observance of the genre. The construction of the household, and other support staff working on estate ventures, is vital to an understanding of privilege and ownership on such estates.<sup>71</sup> 'Magenta' offers an almost wholly female domain, with two head maids or guardians in Miss Perks and Miss Budd and a scullery maid, Magenta. What Kreilkamp describes as the 'archetypal image of a declining social class' is subverted in 'The Joy-Ride', as the Big House is well-maintained, possibly serving as a referential 'nod' to Tom

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<sup>71</sup> Breandán MacAodha, 'Distribution, Function and Architecture', *The Big House in Ireland: Reality and Representation*, ed. by Jacqueline Genet (Dingle, Co. Kerry: Brandon Books, 1991), pp. 43-57 (p. 48).

Lavin's stewardship of Bective.<sup>72</sup> In her study, Angeline Kelly also notes a sense of irony in the details surrounding the overseer and his aspirations.<sup>73</sup> The overseer in 'The Joy-Ride' here believes 'the best preservative for anything was constant use' ('The Joy-Ride', p. 79), although this may be self-interest in planning towards purchase of an ongoing business in the estate as he is biding his time until he can afford to buy out the old property (or so the rumours go). Kelly's ironic reading can be counterbalanced with the genuine engagement that Lavin herself felt with the potential of estate life and in particular the Meath landscape. In 'The Landscape of Mary Lavin', Maurice Harmon recalls Lavin's belief that 'in these flat fields even if a man has only a small piece of earth, he has a lot of the heavens'.<sup>74</sup> The usual geographical and architectural specifications of Big House living is documented: we are told that the estate stood on '400 acres of best land in Meath' ('The Joy-Ride', p. 79), echoing to some extent Bective's own acreage that was reputed to be three hundred acres including woodland.<sup>75</sup> The house of 'The Joy-Ride' also has a well-stocked cellar which is to be the locus of disaster.

The overseer, Malcolm, and the butlers, Purdy and Crickem, are the main focus of the narrative. Crickem represents a younger, partly liberated generation. Purdy is 'about forty, with a bald head and a round belly' with a 'vulnerability that comes to people who have been a great many years in the same employment and who have come to feel that their security is dependent on a single thread' ('The Joy-Ride', p. 80). He is also a terrible drunk. The tension between physical solidity and

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<sup>72</sup> Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House*, p. 21.

<sup>73</sup> Kelly, *Mary Lavin: Quiet Rebel*, p. 27.

<sup>74</sup> Maurice Harmon, 'The Landscape of Mary Lavin', *Ireland and the Welcomes*, 18:6 (1970), pp. 34-37 (p. 34).

<sup>75</sup> There is however, some discrepancy as estate agent particulars (undated) put it at 178 acres, ML 628, box 33, fol. 11: Gotlieb Archive.

psychological fragility embodied in the construction of Purdy contributes a sense of uncertainty to the narrative; this character-driven instability facilitates a potential for change. Purdy, in unquestioningly maintaining a traditional life of servitude, is stifled of imagination and so when the younger butler suggests that they both take an unofficial day off when the overseer is away, he declines at first for fear of reprisal. His reticence is bound to an historical subjugation. As Purdy begins to remember what it was like to think independently, they formulate a plan for a ride into the country, a picnic and, potentially, the company of a pretty young woman on the way. With its strange mixture of past memories and present desire for change, the day is a testimony to failure. The picnic, with its symbolic connection to childhood and a desire to return to the past, makes them ill; they flirt with women as they ride along but do not stop. When they are close to home later that evening they discover that the house they should have kept watch over has burnt to the ground. The reader understands just before Purdy does that it was his fault; he had stolen some sweet liquor from the cellar for their picnic, and he had dropped a lit match whilst searching for the drink. The unexpected recklessness born out of years of subservience, which had engendered their absenteeism, is both bitter and sweet. The reader is left to wonder at the outcome as Purdy and Crickem literally vanish from the pages of the short story at the end, perhaps signifying a new egalitarian future outside of the confines of below-stairs living. The open-ended narrative rejects the more traditional frame of retribution; it suggests a new phase of disruption and unrestricted freedom from consequences as the reader is left to imagine what Purdy and Crickem might do.

‘Magenta’ conforms to the more familiar patterns of decay and isolation in the genre. Trustees of the estate and a solicitor act as external assessors, a man works in the garden while Miss Perks and Miss Budd offer general housekeeping to prevent the residence from fading. They have a keen eye for observing the tasks necessary for the upkeep of the house and grounds but very little appetite for drudgery, and so Magenta performs the heavy tasks. True ownership of the property is never mentioned; the dysfunctional family genealogy is not evident, and neither is the direct usurping of land by an agent, yet Lavin still demonstrates that absence of the legitimate owner allows a false sense of possession and pride in the guardians. The women have become its public face in the locality. A transitional phase of Big House history is being realised here in Lavin’s shifting focus.

The patterns of movement around the Big House that Gearóid Cronin identifies in Bowen’s work can be discerned here.<sup>76</sup> Young Magenta goes to work for someone in the city but returns one afternoon to visit. Messages are delivered to the house by the postman and the locals; minor estate repairs are attended to. However, the two women remain confined within its boundary except for Sunday mass. They are depicted as the living dead with pale skin: ‘[t]he damp and the passageways had bleached their skins till they had at last the same waxen pallor as the faces that peered out from the dark canvasses in the upper galleries of the house’ (‘Magenta’, p. 185). There is the sense that the house will survive where they will not, in stark contrast to the manor house in ‘The Joy Ride.’ At the centre of both narratives also is a concern for survival of the workforce, perhaps marking Lavin’s

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<sup>76</sup> Gearóid Cronin, ‘The Big House and the Irish Landscape in the Work of Elizabeth Bowen’, *The Big House in Ireland*, pp. 143-162.

vested interest in authenticating and inscribing her own family experience. Before publication of these stories Lavin revealed to the editor of *Atlantic Monthly*:

I would prefer to write my boring (to many<sup>people</sup> anyway) and unsaleable (to most magazines anyway) stories, and have a feeling that [in] leaving some small documentation of life, even in its flicking [*sic*] shadows, [...] that would be entertaining.<sup>77</sup>

If Lavin intends to offer ‘documentation of life’, we can read these fictions as enabling a ‘type’ of realism that is capable of contributing to a better understanding of a transitional Big House environment, within which artifice of fiction is complemented by the presence of judiciously selected credible details.

Clair Wills identifies what amounts almost to a sense of bereavement in the 1940s, amongst the reading public, in connection with a longing for the past. Although Wills clearly identifies the success of more popular fiction in Maura Laverty’s novel *Never No More* in meeting this demand, citing Sean O’Faolain’s rhapsodic reading of the text, it is possible to argue for the retention of Big House literature as another form of nostalgia, despite its historical and political overtones and its experiential distance from the majority of the population. This type of reading places Big House narratives such as *The Big House of Inver*, *The Last September*, *Rebecca* and *Two Days in Aragon* within a nostalgic formation, though this is always produced in relation to present realities. Wills notes:

This tension between nostalgia for a lost world and the need to face up to the “real Ireland of today” runs through the popular literature of the period. The

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<sup>77</sup> Letter from Mary Lavin to Ellery Sedgwick dated 25 April 1940: MHS.



public's appetite for rural reminiscence was high, and could be satisfied by travelogues, novels, memoirs, even recipe collections.<sup>78</sup>

This corresponds with Elizabeth Bowen's own insights into the public desire for nostalgia at the turn of the 1950s and its reading preferences.<sup>79</sup> Yet Lavin's Big House narratives move beyond even this model of nostalgia inflected by the difficulties of the present. Her Big House narratives treat the Big House itself as a place of challenge and change. In personal terms this reflects Lavin's associations with Bective House in the 1940s; these shifted somewhat as she and her husband William took on some responsibility for the estate when her father was ill, and for a short while after his death. Lavin's relationship to the Bective estate altered significantly then. Yet despite these difficult changes, Lavin maintains continued interest in matters relating to the Bective landscape; this can be tracked, for instance, through her letters to James Stern.<sup>80</sup> Traces of development towards a more modern Ireland, through patterns of new ownership and development in this type of property, also find their way into short stories such as 'What's Wrong with Aubretia' (1961) and 'A Memory' (1972).

Lavin's Big House narratives benefit from being read alongside Bowen's sophisticated discussion of nostalgia in 'The Bend Back' (1950). However, if Wills' recognition of public demand is read in conjunction with that more contemporary essay by Elizabeth Bowen, a truer sense of the nuances of Lavin's creative judgement emerges. Bowen questions the need for fictional retreat from the realities

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<sup>78</sup> Clair Wills, 'Women Writers and the Death of Rural Ireland: Realism and Nostalgia in the 1940s', *Éire-Ireland*, 41: 1 & 2, (Spring-Summer 2006), 192-212 (p. 205).

<sup>79</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, 'The Bend Back' (1950), *The Mulberry Tree*, (London: Virago Press Ltd, 1986), pp. 54-60, p. 54.

<sup>80</sup> James Stern papers, vol. xxvii ff. MS 80864, 1950-1982: The British Library.

of 1950s Ireland; she argues that fiction could instead be a means to prevail over the adversities of the present. In the post-war context, she suggests, art has restorative and forward-looking potential. Yet in her opinion, by that point, readers had failed to inspire writers to address the challenges of current issues. Bowen also suggests a sense of security is derived from historically distanced nostalgic re-workings of social drama. In this recognition of the aesthetic and emotional differences between a very distant past, and ‘the “near” past [that] holds, however, an ultimately more disturbing appeal’, Bowen strikes to the core of Lavin’s own interests.<sup>81</sup>

Lavin’s short stories actually engage with the more recent fluctuations in the Big House histories, and appear to exploit the desire for the past that Wills identifies; they fashion an apparently accurate experience whilst subverting cosy expectations, a point that Wills has also made about Lavin’s writing technique. She notes:

[T]he critical reality of Mary Lavin’s work stems from her ability to use the language of sentiment and nostalgia against itself to subtly puncture the alliance between nostalgia and consensus-forming realism common to the popular literature of the period. The result is a series of stories that Frank O’Connor would deem “caustic”, and which in their repeated intimations of domestic violence and cruelty belie any notion of comfortable peace.<sup>82</sup>

This in turn challenges Bowen’s observations about solace for the reader; the language of entrapment in ‘The Joy-Ride’ and ‘Magenta’ for instance, subtly underpins Lavin’s accounts of the Big House workforce. It appears natural for them to want to leave. These narratives form an essential part of Ireland’s complex

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<sup>81</sup> Bowen, ‘The Bend Back’, p. 54.

<sup>82</sup> Wills, ‘Women Writers’, p. 212.

twentieth-century history, what Bowen sees as '[r]aw history ... [that] is unnerving'.<sup>83</sup> In 'Women Writers', Wills also makes the point that Lavin writes against expectations of 'nostalgia and sentiment' and it is an appropriate reminder of the critical and searching nature of Lavin's work.<sup>84</sup> However, in *That Neutral Island* Wills is more critical of the exact nature of Lavin's contribution to literature of 'homesickness for the recent past', and despite highlighting Lavin as providing 'more sting in the tail of their depictions of rural life' than others, Wills sees little novelty in writing that recycled a certain vision of rural Ireland for the urban reader.<sup>85</sup>

Lavin's interest in transposing the Big House narrative into the short story format engages with earlier attention to the genre, but it is her connection to that environment that makes her choice unique. It drives her focus on particularity and the complications of internal relationships in the twentieth-century model of the Big House. It is noteworthy that few of Lavin's contemporaries in the 1940s engaged with the Big House mode in the short story. Two earlier examples are worth highlighting, but their narrative point of view is very different from Lavin's: one intimates geographical and temporal dislocation may temper any tensions surrounding ascendancy narratives, particularly in light of when that short story was first published. The other relies heavily on overt management of political activism and benefits from some distance between actual and fictional events in Irish history. Lavin's fictions realise a certain intimacy in terms of her experience of living within such an environment as an adult, and through her father's memories of his time at

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<sup>83</sup> Bowen, 'The Bend Back', p. 57.

<sup>84</sup> Wills, 'Women Writers', p. 209.

<sup>85</sup> Clair Wills, *That Neutral Island: A Cultural History of Ireland During the Second World War* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 297.

Bective House. Elizabeth Bowen's 'The Back Drawing Room' (1926) returns to an echo of a Big House in the anecdotal narration of a visit to Ireland.<sup>86</sup> It is framed as a ghost story, with an audience settled to listen around the sitting-room fire. A marginalised narrator, seemingly uninvited to a social gathering, deflects the conversation from a heavy philosophical discussion on what constitutes human survival after death. His unobtrusive presence amongst a noisy group each vying for attention is elevated once he recounts a visit to his cousin in Ireland the previous year. Oblique references to the safety of the country, raids and civic disturbances are made, contextualising the time-frame of the narrative. Whilst on a cycle ride there his tyre is punctured, and he comes across the property line of a Big House. In search of assistance he ventures to the door, but despite hearing obvious sounds of people playing tennis in the distance, and what he thought was a dog running inside, nobody answers the door. The group listening to the story are wholly engaged at this point; they question him rapidly about the expected desolation of the property, the gloom and assault on the senses: "[a]nd the *smell*' they cried. 'And the *sound*? Didn't you hear an echo? Hadn't you a queer foreboding? Didn't you want to go but yet have to go on?'" ('The Back Drawing Room', p. 206). Bowen deflates the expected build up of a ghost story as the storyteller continues in a rather matter-of-fact manner; it all seems rather ordinary at this point. Even the formulaic construction of a ghost story is laid out by Mennister, one of the guests, to speed the storyteller on to his conclusion. Bowen does not hide the artifice of the moment.

The storyteller talks of how he follows a woman into the back of the house, where he is distracted for the moment by the decor and a slight gloom. Then he sees

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<sup>86</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, 'The Back Drawing Room', *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen* [1980] (London: Penguin Books, 1983), pp. 199-210. All further references are to this edition, and are given in the text.

and hears the woman sobbing uncontrollably and her misery frightens him. He reveals to his listeners 'I make no bones about it – I was terrified. She made me feel the end of the world was coming' ('The Back Drawing Room', pp. 208-9); this is the first concrete gesture to the genre of the ghost story and is excessively dramatic in relation to the preceding events. As the storyteller recalls how he left the property it is as if the listeners play out the story for him; they interject, suggesting comparisons to literary dangers 'Like the House of Usher' ('The Back Drawing Room', p. 209), and reminding him of the new silence in the house and its grounds. When he gets back to his cousin's house, he tells his listeners, he is told that the house does not exist and that it was burnt down two years before. The owners were all safe, and had moved on to Dublin. All the resonances of Big House history are here. What is strange about the story is the mood it engenders in the evening's hostess, Mrs Henneker. She had been arguing at the outset that memory creates an alternative form of people and things quite apart from the original; that a substitute lives on outside of its initial frame of reference. The female figure clearly harkens to the Ascendancy families long gone, and there is demonstrable sympathy bound up in the narrative: the abject misery of the woman expresses the loss of a particular type of history, and yet it can be remembered only through the story within a story. Bowen clearly demonstrates the suitability of the genre for her own interest in the Big House, suggesting its special role within the particular dynamics of loss in memoir and fiction. The very ordinariness of the story is juxtaposed with the horror the storyteller reveals, heightening its impact. It makes the related event authentic through a tangible realism.

The title story in Sean O’Faolain’s collection ‘Midsummer Night Madness’ (1932) focuses on similar environs, but in a more resolutely political manner.<sup>87</sup> O’Faolain offers a more caustic and opinionated response to what might be considered the blight of the Ascendancy inheritance; reading O’Faolain here it is apparent this is no nostalgic route. In contrast to his sentimental introduction to the work of another Irish writer, Maura Laverty, here he is less inclined to defend the existence of a nostalgic idealised past.<sup>88</sup> ‘Midsummer Night Madness’ has a tripartite structure, is a first person narrative, and introduces the activist Stevey Long through its narrator, John; this is the first in a series of short stories charting Long’s downfall. It offers positive descriptors of a Big House known as Henn Hall that the narrator will spend time in:

[A] wonderful old house [...] sitting up on its own high hill, its two gable chimneys like two cocked ears and its empty windows gazing wide-eyed down the river valley – very tall, with a wide door whose steps curled down and around like moustaches. (‘Midsummer Night Madness’, p. 11)

The anticipated grandeur and aloofness of the Big House is undercut by the use of personification that links it simultaneously to the domesticated dog and a parodied officer-type. It is also referred to as the Red House, a local nickname, which over-familiarises it and diminishes its impact as the story develops. As Denis Sampson notes, this ties in with the narrator’s desire to obliterate the owner of the Big House:

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<sup>87</sup> Sean O’Faolain, ‘Midsummer Night Madness’ [1932] *Midsummer Night Madness and Other Stories* (London: Penguin Books, 1982). All further references are to this edition, and are given in the text.

<sup>88</sup> Sean O’Faolain, ‘Preface’ to Maura Laverty, *Never No More* (London; New York; Toronto: Longman’s, Green & Co, 1946), p. vi. As he writes of Laverty’s skilled observations there is no sense of mockery.

‘the end of a once-prosperous and powerful Anglo-Irish family pleases John’, for he hates the owner Henn and all that he represents.<sup>89</sup>

This is not John’s main objective in travelling outside of the city, although his visceral response to seeing the house brings strong emotions to the surface. John is set to make an assessment on why Stevey Long has failed to report any concrete activity for some time. They are both members of the Republican army and arrangements have been made to accommodate John secretly in the vicinity. The narrative unfolds in three stages: part one is about John’s journey to the house, part two details the relationships between Stevey, the maidservant Gypsy and the old man Henn. An obvious love-triangle is set before John, and it is obvious that Stevey’s lack of activity over the past few months is bound up in his affair with the girl. The complication of meeting the ineffectual Henn and observing the diminution of his hold over the household jars somewhat, and adds a sense of foreboding to the narrative. Friendly relations are not a part of this encounter. Part three is a visualised microcosm of the burnings of the Big Houses in Irish history. Across the river from Henn Hall another house is set alight and Stevey Long turns up to burn Henn Hall, fuelled by sexual jealousy and impotence, unable to rationalise the thought of Gypsy’s seduction by Henn. John the narrator is caught in the middle of this, he recognises ‘an old story’ in the pregnant servant (‘Midsummer Night Madness’, p. 36), and inevitably the resolution of the narrative places Gypsy with Henn as a new order of a declining dynasty. The dirt, decay and destruction are a long way from the almost comic annihilation of the house in Lavin’s ‘The Joy-Ride’.

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<sup>89</sup> Denis Sampson, ‘The Big House in Sean O’Faolain’s Fiction’, *The Big House in Ireland: Reality and Representation*, ed. by Jacqueline Genet (Dingle, Co. Kerry: Brandon Books, 1991), pp. 179-190 (p. 182).

‘Midsummer Night Madness’ sets itself apart from the nostalgic course taken by other writers that Wills and Bowen recognise. Its active depiction of the burning of one house, coupled with the decay and abandonment of another, forces a concrete recognition of the events of Irish history. It is an interesting contrast to the subtlety present in Lavin’s stories that essentially mask a critique of similar territory to O’Faolain. Her understated reviews of *Big House* decline in these narratives of the 1940s and 1950s, informed by her father’s own life narrative and her experiences of *Bective House*, run alongside the public desire for familiarity and security that Wills recognises.<sup>90</sup> Here, Lavin resists overt depictions of combative destruction at a time when the resonances of the Second World War are still apparent to readers. Nevertheless, the fictions draw on a recognizable historical framework for her readership, recognising the public shift in mood that Elizabeth Bowen suggests is present. In light of Lavin’s fierce defence of the short story throughout her lifetime it should not be a surprise that she challenges and satisfies the reader with such an enormous scope of reference in these *Big House* fictions. Lavin believes the short story has limitless potential.

Howard Gotlieb expressed some reticence about the value of Tom Lavin’s letters for ‘a general public’, yet he did acknowledge that they were a part of Mary Lavin’s life and as such, should be purchased in the future.<sup>91</sup> Indeed they were a year later.<sup>92</sup> In fact, Tom Lavin’s letters are crucial to a deeper understanding of Mary’s fictions. They are marked by their emotional intensity even after their

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<sup>90</sup> Wills, ‘Women Writers’, p. 205.

<sup>91</sup> Letter from Howard Gotlieb dated 29 November 1982, fol. 15: James Joyce Library.

<sup>92</sup> Inventory of contents of parcel received dated 18 November 1983; not held in archive boxes on general access to public: Gotlieb Archive.



original construction and taking into account the time that has passed. Liz Stanley suggests that this ‘moment’ of writing returns when letters are read:

[T]he present tense of the letter recurs – or rather occurs – not only in its first reading but subsequent ones too. Letters thereby share some of the temporal complexities of photographs: they not only hold memory but also always represent the moment of their production, and have a similar ‘flies in amber’ quality.<sup>93</sup>

Mary Lavin’s letter to Gotlieb in the early 1980s underscores the importance of negotiating the content of her father’s letters long after the original writer and recipient had corresponded.<sup>94</sup> The Big House fictions are clearly informed by their substance. Marking Stanley’s comments on the revalorisation of a particular context through letters, Chapter 5 of this thesis also references Lavin’s correspondences with editors and publishing staff, and draws on their valuable insights into the 1940s and 1950s fictions. Ahead of that, Chapter 4 will take a closer look at another facet of Lavin’s body of work, her engagement with the novella form. Just as the impact of the Big House fictions has been underestimated in readings of Lavin’s short stories, so too has the significance of the novella ‘The Becker Wives’.

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<sup>93</sup> Liz Stanley, ‘The Epistolarium: On Theorising Letters and Correspondences’, *Autobiography*, 12 (2004), 201-235 (p. 208).

<sup>94</sup> Letter to Howard Gotlieb from Mary Lavin dated 30 November 1983: Gotlieb Archive.

## Chapter 4

### 'The Becker Wives': Shifting Scale

Lavin's third collection *The Becker Wives and Other Stories* (1946) is distinct because of its focus on just four stories: 'The Joy-Ride' and 'Magenta' have been examined as part of Lavin's Big House narratives in Chapter 3, 'The Becker Wives' is considered here separately as a longer short story or novella. 'A Happy Death' completes the collection. As Lavin develops her skills as a short story writer alongside publication of her two novels, *The House in Clewe Street* (1945) and *Mary O'Grady* (1950), her interest in exploring the potential of the longer short story or novella at this time is noteworthy, especially in light of the novella's hybrid quality. This focus suggests 'The Becker Wives' in particular is a professional testing ground to explore both subject-matter and delivery in an extended mode.

Both novellas in *The Becker Wives* can therefore be read as part of that developmental process; the challenges they present as very different forms of creative expression should not be underestimated. 'The Becker Wives' in particular is breathtakingly different in its fusion of the dominant realist modes which resonate in the majority of her short stories and its depiction of a quasi-performance art through Flora's behaviour; it provides an unsettling picture of a woman with a history of psychological trauma. This makes it worthy of special attention in a reappraisal of her fictions. The element of performance is such that it would translate effortlessly to the small or big screen. Elizabeth Bowen's comments on the short story are apposite here: that 'in its use of action it is nearer to drama than to the novel', and that its kinship with the cinematic form is notable.<sup>1</sup> In the 1980s Janet Dunleavy did raise the possibility of adapting 'The Becker Wives' to film,

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, *The Faber Book of Modern Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937), p. 7.

suggesting Lavin contact her agent with that in mind. She recommended the actress Diane Keaton as an ideal Flora.<sup>2</sup> No further discussion appears to have taken place. Lavin also revealed plans for 'The Becker Wives' to be illustrated by Edward Ardizzone, but this did not happen either.<sup>3</sup>

Whilst 'The Becker Wives' has been explicitly classified as a novella within Lavin's oeuvre its publishing history, although slight, resists such authoritative labelling. Deciding where to place 'The Becker Wives' is complicated by readings of the novella as a reflection, or lesser form of the novel. Alongside this tension, the novella is seen as a sometimes unsatisfactory version of a longer short story.<sup>4</sup> Establishing its position within Lavin's body of work is, however, also challenged by where 'The Becker Wives' is incorporated, as it has been republished in another short story collection *The Stories of Mary Lavin*, Volume 2 (1974) as well as being included in *Twelve Modern Short Novels* (1949). Nevertheless, for consistency and ease of reference, 'The Becker Wives' and 'A Happy Death' will be referred to as novellas, as they are of approximately the same extended length and that in itself is noticeably greater than the other short stories. Yet it should be noted that in other terms they meet Poe's simple criteria for the short story: they are able to be read in one sitting, despite their extended length. 'The Becker Wives' is a distinct, stand-alone narrative, and worthy of individual re-publication. 'A Happy Death' is best served as part of a collection, as it is closely linked thematically to other short stories and only ever appears in subsequent collections during Lavin's lifetime. In his

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<sup>2</sup> Letter from Janet Egleson Dunleavy to Mary Lavin dated 17 September 1982, fol. 11: James Joyce Library.

<sup>3</sup> L. Robert Stevens and Sylvia Stevens, 'An Interview with Mary Lavin', *Studies*, 86:341 (1997), 43-50 (p. 49).

<sup>4</sup> Graham Good, 'Notes on the Novella', *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. by Charles E. May (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1994), pp. 147-164.

review of *At Sallygap and Other Stories* (1947), James Stern comments on the length and incompleteness of 'A Happy Death', comparing it to the 'first draft of a novel'.<sup>5</sup> Yet this version is highly praised by Peterson and Kelly. Stern's dissatisfaction with it as a short story fails to come to terms with the speed with which it was republished in that form in another collection. Lavin and her publishers kept the format intact, and her own thoughts on the novella were clear:

I like novels short enough in concept, if not in length [...] to have a unity equal to the unity of the short story. I think that the long short story and the novella are one. I even think of the novel and the short story as being the same at times and that the novel is coming nearer to the short story.<sup>6</sup>

Lavin suggests that the work of Woolf, Mansfield, Cather and Wharton marks some sort of literary transition in form.

Peterson notes 'A Happy Death', in Lavin's terms, 'achieves the goal of being just the right length', although Peterson's comment could be read as if he is exhausted by Lavin's extended narrative and the emotionally draining passage from the territory of the domestic to the public.<sup>7</sup> The physical dimensions of the novella do reflect a stretch in the sequence of events. What he more pertinently defends is the literary balance within 'A Happy Death' of 'form and content, theme and technique', but there is a sense that assessment is clouded by resistance to more overt experimentalism in Lavin's work that 'The Becker Wives' possesses.<sup>8</sup> 'A Happy Death' chronicles disappointment and misunderstanding, alienation and self-sacrifice

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<sup>5</sup> James Stern, 'A Soft Irish Pitch', *New York Times*, 9 February 1947, p. BR12: Proquest, British Library.

<sup>6</sup> Maurice Harmon, 'Appendix': 'Conversations With Mary Lavin', in *Maurice Harmon: Selected Essays*, ed. by Barbara Brown (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), pp. 209-215 (pp. 210-211).

<sup>7</sup> Richard Peterson, *Mary Lavin* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), p. 40.

<sup>8</sup> Peterson, *Mary Lavin*, p. 40.

within one marriage and Peterson's admiration centres on its narrative consistency and easily anticipated conclusion around what he notes as a basic theme.<sup>9</sup> This suggests that the novella performs as a site of familiarity and security for the reader by following established technical patterns. Both Peterson and Bowen agree on its merits, with Bowen suggesting it is 'perhaps the best of all the Lavin stories'; however, behind this accord may well be a tension that Elke D'hoker suggests surrounds Lavin's fictions, to establish where they can be placed in the canon.<sup>10</sup> Peterson's assessment does not position Lavin as an innovator in this novella, but his comments suggest 'A Happy Death' is a good fit as a literary model. Peterson and Bowen give succinct outlines of 'A Happy Death' and so it is not proposed to extend that here. However, it is apposite to highlight that 'A Happy Death' utilises extrinsic identifiers, for instance detailed environmental descriptors and attentiveness to physical health and attire, to underpin Lavin's focus on realist depictions of Irish society. In sharp contrast to the ironic tenor in close descriptions of the Becker family in 'The Becker Wives', Lavin generates an empathic understanding of public and private alienation in the physical images of Robert and Ella, the married couple in 'A Happy Death'.

Wife Ella is one of many dispiriting and disappointed women that Lavin places in her fictions: Manny's wife Annie in 'At Sallygap' or the carter's wife in 'A Cemetery in the Demesne' similarly fail to recognise their negative impact upon their own marriages. The realities of sickness and unemployment, the pressures of looking after a disabled child, the taking in of lodgers and ongoing money worries

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<sup>9</sup> Peterson, *Mary Lavin*, p. 40.

<sup>10</sup> Zack Bowen, *Mary Lavin* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1975), p. 36; Peterson, *Mary Lavin*, p. 40; Elke D'hoker, 'Beyond the Stereotypes: Mary Lavin's Irish Women', *Irish Studies Review*, 16:4 (November 2008), 415-430.

contribute to a rapid descent into humiliation on both sides of this marriage in 'A Happy Death', long before its conclusion. When Robert's health deteriorates to the point that he loses his respectable job in the Reading Room of the Library (his coughing disturbs readers) he has to resort to the demotion of a porter's role in the same location, which infuriates Ella. She plots and schemes to remove him from his post, little realising that if Robert gives up work it will be a defining moment in their lives. In actual fact, his illness determines when he leaves his porter's job, not her scheming.

The economic deprivations of 1930s and 1940s urban Ireland come to the fore in this fiction. Lavin demarcates past and present fortunes in a number of retrospective intrusions to highlight the physical and emotional deterioration between husband and wife. For instance, the marital home had become run down over the years, a manifestation of this decline. We get glimpses of their earlier life but these are always located in the reality of the present:

A vision rose up before her of the yard as she had kept it in the first year of her marriage. Robert used to say that he didn't miss a garden she kept the yard so nice. She used to whitewash the walls every Saturday, and she had butter boxes painted green, and filled with red geraniums. But it wasn't long before she got sense.<sup>11</sup>

Use of the past tense lodges both the picture-book image and the promise of what their marriage could be in an evocation of rural living. They actually live in the city in a tenement. Lavin's distortion of a key image from Irish tourism campaigns, the

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<sup>11</sup> Mary Lavin, 'A Happy Death', *The Becker Wives and Other Stories* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd, 1946), p. 121. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

well-kept limed and whitewashed cottage, makes all too real the gap between idealised versions of city and country living and the reality of social deprivation. Whilst the publication date of *The Becker Wives* suggests Lavin responds to earlier travel literature here, undoubtedly the later stylised postcards of John Hinde that Claire Connolly highlights as having a ‘lasting hold on the imagination of artists and critics’ also play their part in Lavin’s fictions emerging from the late 1950s.<sup>12</sup> Here, though, Lavin pre-empts ‘the strange, self-conscious evocations of nostalgia in the postcards of John Hinde’ that Luke Gibbons draws readers’ attention to, in order to provide a link with Ella and Robert’s past history.<sup>13</sup>

The practical applications of lime and whitewash to walls would actually have prevented the growth of lichen, but in the present of the narrative, the yard is strewn with rubbish and filthy and decayed. For a woman who was always so keen to present a successful public face, and who relies on an income from lodgers, the neglect is palpable. This literal and metaphorical image of social and familial deterioration foreshadows later descriptions of the cottage belonging to Mad Mary Dawe in ‘Lemonade’ (1961); there the disjuncture between home as a site of comfort and refuge and home as mere shelter is acutely drawn. Lavin’s use of key architectural motifs to chart psychological and physical decline in her fictions is worthy of note.

Lavin’s earlier story ‘The Will’ (1944) also references urban reliance on lodging income to supplement or in some cases absolutely drive economic survival. Similar resonances of deterioration and defeat are linked to the physical descriptions

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<sup>12</sup> Claire Connolly, ed., ‘Introduction’, *Theorizing Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Luke Gibbons, ‘Introduction: Culture, History and Irish Identity’, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), p. 11.

of Lally, who returns home for her mother's funeral having eloped many years ago and subsequently been ostracised by her mother. On the day she left, Lally wore two pale blue feathers in her hat, and these brave markers of promise and defiance are recalled by her mother just before she dies, but Kate, Lally's sister, has no idea of their relevance. When Lally begins her journey back to the city after the reading of her mother's will, these feathers are linked in performance terms to Lally's own ageing process:

She herself was the same as she always was, although her teeth were rotted, and a blue feather in her hat now would make her look like an old hag in a pantomime. [...] There was only one thing that could change you, and that was death.<sup>14</sup>

This picture is complicated by its intimate revelation of defeat, suggesting some slippage from the sense of detachment that Lavin's realist fictions usually adopt. However, Ella's own decline is equally marked in 'A Happy Death'; the management of detail is what controls narrative authenticity.

Lavin relentlessly highlights the physical marks of poverty in Ella and Robert. Ella's own appearance is a source of great displeasure to her; gone are the soft hands and fine skin of her youth. Poverty and hard work have coarsened her skin. Ella is now visibly 'worn' with 'hard black dirt [...] under her nails' ('A Happy Death', p. 139). Inwardly she is bitter, lonely and angry at life. Former images of Robert as a well-dressed, good-looking man, a city dweller not a ruddy-faced farmer, a lover of poetry, also sit uneasily alongside a no-nonsense and resigned list of

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<sup>14</sup> Mary Lavin, 'The Will', *The Long Ago and Other Stories* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd, 1944), p. 17. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.



hardships centred on the extrinsic marker of his clothing. Again, the omniscient intrusion into the narrative compounds our sense of the family's economic privation:

[Y]ou can't keep the colour in shirts for ever, and a shirt never looks the same after it's patched. And shoes won't give the same shine when the leather is cracked. [...] Before they were a year married every suit he had was threadbare. But he wore most of them out sitting about on the benches of the registry offices looking for work. [...] Clothes didn't last long when you put them to the test. ('A Happy Death', pp. 125-126)

The reality of unemployment, poverty, and the real fear that families might not meet the most basic of obligations, belies the complacency of de Valera's vision of Ireland. What is most distressing is that Lavin places these characters in an irretrievable position: both withdraw from the misery of their current existence to memories of an idealised earlier period in their relationship; neither is capable of making the other truly happy. Death appears to be the only solution to their predicament, much as Lally's sentiments suggest in 'The Will'. Maurice Harmon points to the following in Lavin's fiction:

The human mind in her work is wonderfully open, its complexities and contradictions laid bare. In fact it is the closed mind that is found wanting, the mind without sufficient flexibility and depth to deal with experience.<sup>15</sup>

Such closure, albeit complicated by external pressures, is evident here. Ella and Robert's relationship is challenged by a certain intellectual and emotional rigidity; it

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<sup>15</sup> Maurice Harmon, 'Mary Lavin: Moralism of the Heart', *Maurice Harmon: Selected Essays*, ed. by Barbara Brown (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), pp. 72-81 (p. 81).

is as if they have been frozen at a point in early marriage, where naivety and enthusiasm was no great defence.

Despite the financial practicality of taking in lodgers, Robert secretly harbours an intense hatred of the intrusion they cause. In his delirium, just before his emergency admission to hospital, seven times he calls out ‘strangers’, as if they are an army invading his home. In his confused state, Robert is finally able to articulate how he feels, reduced to Ella’s level of shame about their circumstances. In hospital Ella herself breaks down, albeit into a form of self-deluded madness driven by her obsession with appropriate public appearance. This is just as Robert deteriorates; ultimately, Robert and Ella’s children lose both parents in some way at the end of the narrative. The circumstances surrounding this futile death are damningly linked with poverty, neglect and a refusal to accept reality; undoubtedly Robert could have been treated successfully if both he and Ella rose to the challenge and managed their existences. Lavin is scrupulous and brutally honest when assessing the damage done to both Ella and Robert; their marital relationship was based on false assumptions of what happiness means.

‘The Becker Wives’ offers an even more complex and nuanced observation of the family and social distinction. Three key markers frame the following reading: Margaret Church suggests that ‘Mary Lavin attacks habit and social rigidity in general [where the] structure of any life that is governed by false distinctions or ingrained patterns of behaviour is for her fair game’.<sup>16</sup> Such an assault is clearly evident in this, Lavin’s finest composition. Augustine Martin’s cautionary

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<sup>16</sup> Margaret Church, ‘Social Consciousness in the Works of Elizabeth Bowen, Irish Murdoch and Mary Lavin’, *College Literature*, 7:2 (Spring 1980), 158-163 (p. 161)  
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25111327>> [accessed 13/10/2009].

observation that, as ‘such a richly structured work’ it must be given due care and attention, also underpins this analysis.<sup>17</sup> To discover such a dense and yet generously expansive narrative is at once a pleasure and a challenge. It deserves our attention. Finally, Tony Whedon’s comments on the novella are also particularly relevant to ‘The Becker Wives’: ‘Novellas are often products of cultural/familial dislocation, or reflect the disintegration of established social orders’.<sup>18</sup> With this in mind, the relevance of ‘The Becker Wives’ in terms of publication just after the Second World War contributes to this particular reading.

‘The Becker Wives’ is a pivotal text in Lavin’s oeuvre.<sup>19</sup> It expresses a clear unease with the burdens of the old, a chafing against traditional and restrictive customs and practices and yet caution in the face of the new. It also provides social commentary on the plight of the middle classes who are faced with significant change to their way of life. Emerging from the sustained restrictions of the Second World War and a conservative regime under Eamon de Valera, it also foregrounds deep reservations about modernity, marking how the desire for change and the rejection of traditional values might destabilise even the strongest social unit. Augustine Martin’s essay brings this novella to the attention of readers, clearly locating it in a ‘modern Ireland’.<sup>20</sup> This suggests a referential point that allows for a reading of the novella that exemplifies rather than merely illustrates, to borrow from

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<sup>17</sup> Augustine Martin, ‘A Skeleton Key to the Stories of Mary Lavin’, *Studies*, 52 (Winter 1963), 393-406 (p. 394).

<sup>18</sup> Tony Whedon, ‘Notes on the Novella’, *Southwest Review* 96:4 (Dallas: 2011), p. 565, 8 pgs <[http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=R04608711&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1360774371\\_8243&trailId=13C39FA510C&area=abell&forward=critref\\_ft](http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=R04608711&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1360774371_8243&trailId=13C39FA510C&area=abell&forward=critref_ft)> [accessed 13 February 2013]

<sup>19</sup> Mary Lavin, ‘The Becker Wives’, *The Becker Wives and Other Stories* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd, 1946). All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>20</sup> Martin, ‘A Skeleton Key’, p. 394.

Luke Gibbons' introduction to *Transformations in Irish Culture*.<sup>21</sup> In addition, the following readings of 'The Becker Wives' suggest a common denominator: Zack Bowen draws attention to Flora's madness as a means to escape from 'oppressions'; this can be similarly connected to the period.<sup>22</sup> Peterson underlines its focus on the loss of personal identity.<sup>23</sup> Angeline Kelly introduces it as an amusing satire on the complacency of the successful middle classes and their inevitable failure, but underscores its 'psychological and emotional depth' as the tragedy of Flora unfolds.<sup>24</sup> It has also been read as a story of madness and illusion by McHugh and Harmon, who recognise the quest for identity in its protagonist, Flora.<sup>25</sup> Michael Neary proposes it as a search for what Irishness means.<sup>26</sup> The common thematic train of thought in these essays is a separation of some sort between the individual and society at times of upheaval.

The narrative focus is on urban living and a specific section of the middle classes. In the early stages of the novella, the second generation of the family, consisting of four brothers and a sister, all appear to trust each other and their position within the family group. However, their private and public interests are intertwined in their father's business and this creates certain tensions. Their inheritance had been calculated and distributed by this patriarch, resulting in their eventual partnerships in the firm. This secures a sense of stability and sound

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<sup>21</sup> Gibbons, 'Introduction: Culture, History and Irish Identity', *Transformations in Irish Culture*, pp. 3-22, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> Bowen, *Mary Lavin*, p. 33.

<sup>23</sup> Peterson, *Mary Lavin*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>24</sup> Kelly, *Mary Lavin*, p. 23.

<sup>25</sup> Roger McHugh and Maurice Harmon, *Short History of Anglo-Irish Literature from its Origins to the Present Day* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1982), p. 283.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Neary, 'Flora's answer to the Irish question: A Study of Mary Lavin's "The Becker Wives"', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 42:4 (Hempstead: Winter 1996), 516 (10 pages)  
<[http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=R01768323&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1368698479\\_28225&trailId=13E124A9B1C&area=mla&forward=critref\\_ft](http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=R01768323&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1368698479_28225&trailId=13E124A9B1C&area=mla&forward=critref_ft)> [second access 16 May 2013].

connection to the traditions of trade and commerce. So a superficial sense of security is established amongst them. However, whilst they enjoy the material benefits of their father's prudence, some also chafe against what they see as restrictive practice. Critical readings of this novella acknowledge Lavin's strategy of making concrete a lifestyle that later is so easily weakened. For instance, Susan Asbee highlights the importance of the first third of 'The Becker Wives' in establishing an atmosphere of 'solid middle-class values' before Flora is introduced.<sup>27</sup> That initial grounding is important in relation to how, as the narrative unfolds, there is a deliberate fracturing of this collective assurance within the family. Kelly's suggestion that 'The Becker Wives' works as a satirical piece holds some weight; the voice of the narrator is at once mocking and yet appreciative of the constraints, albeit at times self-imposed, which are placed upon the Becker family. The tenor of the narrative is both critical, of the static and self-complacent Becker family, whose inherited success appears to have weakened their business acumen and awareness of social convention, and disapproving of rapid change to the status quo. Ultimately the narrative rejects the ephemeral and insubstantial changes ahead, as signified by the unexpected addition to the family in Flora. The younger son's new wife does act as a conduit for change even as her humorous antics, the mimicry of others and the apparently innocuous party games all take on sinister connotations when she overdevelops them. The pace of the narrative speeds dramatically as her descent into madness becomes more obvious and the novelty factor offered by Flora with her poetry, modernist artistic patronage and dramatic impersonations becomes dangerous and unsustainable.

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<sup>27</sup> Susan Asbee, 'Mary Lavin's "The Becker Wives": Narrative Strategy and Reader Response', *Journal of the Short Story in English*, 8 (1987), 93-101 (p. 99).

Regarded as a disappointment by Frank O'Connor, who sees it as 'only the ghost of a story', 'The Becker Wives' critiques the comfortable existence of a well-to-do family whose status had been built on the success of the patriarch, old Bartholomew Becker, in the corn trade during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>28</sup> O'Connor argues that Lavin 'deliberately eschews the physical world' in this novella, and maybe it is this disappointment at less obvious topographical referencing, rather than the usual fields and waterways of Dublin and Meath in Lavin's fiction that he misses.<sup>29</sup> Undeniably it departs from the more realistic mode that Lavin usually adopts, and there are other short stories that work in a similar way, as discussed in Chapter 2. That does afford O'Connor some personal luxury of criticism here. However, he misses the fine detail of 'The Becker Wives'; it offers a grounded sense of interior location central to our understanding of the world which these characters inhabit. Whether O'Connor is in fact identifying the narrative as a mediation, or transition point between the past and the present, or more critically, an insubstantial piece of work is not clear. A more obvious reading of the narrative is that its focus on the domestic lives of the characters critiques the traditional model of women's roles. After all, it offers a key female protagonist as an emblem of change. However, the placing of Flora as a strategist for change is flawed as she represents a blemished inheritance that has the potential to destroy the stability of family life. The narrative itself is more of a psychological thriller or fantastical cautionary tale and far more complex than O'Connor seems to think.

'The Becker Wives' is constructed through a series of binary oppositions.

The female characters work in opposition to each other: married or single,

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<sup>28</sup> Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (New Jersey: Melville House Publishing, 2004), p. 203. All further references are to this edition.

<sup>29</sup> O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice*, p. 203.

established family members or newcomers, fertile or barren, physically large or physically small. Most significantly, the trope of the outsider embodied in Flora is diametrically opposed to the inclusive sisterhood of the Becker women. The lines become blurred as the female characters are represented both as symbols of restriction and of freedom, and where these lines blur there is an emerging sense of disquiet. The matriarch Anna, for instance, introduced earlier as a positive indicator of social stability, is absent for the most part in the narrative. Early on in their marriage old Bartholomew, it is suggested, understands fully that ‘[t]he sobering effect of motherhood’ will place her firmly under his control (‘The Becker Wives’, p. 9). In fact, all the Becker women are presented as staid and predictable, unlikely to threaten the peace and tranquillity of the lives of their male counterparts. There are exceptions to the presumed level-headedness of this patriarchal stronghold: Samuel and the younger son Theobald. Asbee points out that early on in the narrative Samuel ‘shows a potentially sensitive side’ as he walks home with his brother from a family dinner.<sup>30</sup> The dramatic interludes surrounding Flora that we see later are indeed tentatively pre-empted here through references to the stage and performance; even the streets appear ‘theatrically unreal’ to him (‘The Becker Wives’, p. 19). Samuel’s enjoyment in the moment is cut short as he hopes ‘that Theobald would not insist on dragging him back to reality’, a sentiment equally applicable to Flora later on (‘The Becker Wives’, p. 19). Yet despite this waywardness Samuel conforms in other ways to the Becker protocols in the early stages of the narrative until Flora arrives. The 1946 edition of ‘The Becker Wives’ is a more complex reading of Samuel’s emotions: Lavin extends this episode to compound its dreamlike quality. Asbee’s reading is based on *Selected Stories* (1981); there, and in *The Stories of*

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<sup>30</sup> Asbee, ‘Mary Lavin’s “The Becker Wives”’, p. 95.

*Mary Lavin*, Volume 2 (1974), Lavin truncates words and phrases in that paragraph, eliminating a key sentence. That crisper, sharper version loses the poignancy of the original and its resonances have more in common with the stark opening section of Elizabeth Bowen's 'Mysterious Kôr'.<sup>31</sup>

Theobald on the other hand is both conventional in his business practice yet, unusually for a Becker man, drawn to the idea of distinction from his brothers within his personal life. He is an unwitting catalyst for change in the family. His desire to create some distance from them is already fuelled by his father's patronage; he was educated outside of the firm. He now acts as legal counsel to the business, and is torn between a practical need to gain contracts and a personal desire to move upwards socially. He longs for social recognition and acceptance from outsiders, and his secretive quest for a new wife evidences far more of the capricious nature which so concerned his late father about his own wife, Anna. Theobald stands apart from his siblings; his dissatisfaction with their way of life borders on the insolent, even his mother is not good enough for the family name in his opinion. His inverted snobbery denies the blood ties and birth allegiance one would have expected from a son as he criticises his brothers' poor marriage choices: 'Surely they ought to do better than their father' ('The Becker Wives', p. 10). He goes so far as to suggest his brother Samuel should have bought position 'and distinction [...] preferably the latter' ('The Becker Wives', p. 31) rather than marry into another mediocre version of their own social and economic position. Socially closed status, implying more insular privileged access to a higher social class, is far more important to Theobald. Yet Bartholomew Becker's targeted protectionism towards his own dynasty has

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<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, 'Mysterious Kôr', *The Demon Lover & Other Stories* [1945] (London: Penguin Books, 1966), pp. 178-195.



ultimately weakened the younger Beckers' ability to interact socially on equal terms with others, and Theobald is as unschooled as his siblings, despite his pretensions. His condescension towards his family is at once affected to establish a sense of his social frustration and unease, and yet a plausible human reaction to embarrassing circumstance.

This type of dissatisfaction with one's own social context echoes the sentiments of Kate O'Brien's *Without My Cloak* (1931), published some fifteen years earlier. There the sexuality of two breakaway characters (siblings Caroline and Eddie) is used as a motif to express discontent and independence from the confining nature of the family, as is Theobald's desire for a different type of wife. Caroline Lanigan (née Considine) attempts to break free from the restrictions of her own marriage and falls in love with Richard Froude, an English Protestant who is the close friend of her brother, Eddy. Eddy in turn harbours a 'surface' incestuous, yet innocent, love for his sister Caroline and acknowledges that: "She did me great harm. She made it impossible for me to look at other women without measuring them against her [...] I've never loved a woman except Caroline".<sup>32</sup> It is a rather awkward and sensationalised attempt to create discord within a model of Irish patriarchy. O'Brien sets up a strange emotional triangle (for there are questions about the liberated secrecy of the relationship between Richard and Eddy) and although it is daring in its attempts to introduce sexual difference, it is clumsy in its playing out of the relationship. In 'The Becker Wives' Lavin handles the focus on family discord more adroitly; whilst Theobald's desire for social distance is less about sexual

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<sup>32</sup> Kate O'Brien, *Without My Cloak* [1931] (London: Virago Press Ltd, 1993), p. 198.

freedom and more about community prestige, there is still the rejection of the norms and practices of an idealised patriarchal family structure.

‘The Becker Wives’ makes explicit the principle that female sexuality has to be curbed for the good of the male:

Spinsterhood was abhorrent to old Bartholomew. In his eyes it was the cause of all manner of ills from neurosis to dyspepsia, but bachelorhood was more than repugnant; it was dangerous, morally dangerous. In short, to old Bartholomew, marriage represented safety and security. (‘The Becker Wives’, p. 9)

His wife Anna’s position in the novella acknowledges the expectations of the Church and State on family matters in Ireland. Anna, the matriarch, sets the gold standard not only for her own daughter Henrietta, but for all the women who marry into the family. She *is* the ideal in an Ireland of conventional marital values; she brings ‘Content [...] more often than not large with child’ (‘The Becker Wives’, p. 9).

Any suggestion that her husband, old Bartholomew Becker, may be sexually unfaithful or even worse, distracted from his money-making operations early on in the marriage, is quickly removed as the reader learns that she has unwittingly engendered:

an exactly suitable blend of desire and appeasement to rouse his desire to make more money for her, without at the same time allowing that desire to become so itchy and urgent that he would be compelled to go up to her before he had completed all that he had intended to do for that night. (‘The Becker Wives’, p. 9)

This humorous observation belies a genuine sense of entrapment for Anna as she is dominated sexually, held within the confines of the marital home and business, destined to a life of pregnancy and childbirth no matter how comfortable her existence might be. The marital bed becomes a place of confinement and isolation for long periods. The use of the adverb ‘itchingly’ is awkward here though, and the coarse semantic shift pre-empting Anna and Bartholomew’s sexual relationship is unsettling. Despite old Bartholomew’s evident restraint over time, it provokes an embarrassingly amusing double entendre attempting to appeal to a base sense of humour, and offers a limiting biological urgency that restricts Anna’s own sexual authority. Potentially her available presence instead offers a purely animal-like response should Bartholomew wish to avail himself. There is some suggestion that Anna fought and won a series of battles during her marriage, and benefited from ‘fallals and fripperies [...] gained in conjugal contests’ (‘The Becker Wives’, p. 13) which were later passed on to the younger Becker women. Such economic acuity might have been by design or by accident, but the measure of her worth is in ribbons and gaudy accessories; neither would be lucrative investments to ensure her personal status and security.

This reference to sexual matters is carefully positioned early on in the novella; it foreshadows a series of figurative constructions connoting the farmyard and the Becker women. It structures the novella, orientating the genesis of the Becker fortune and its influence over the next generation, as well as the basic principles by which the family live. In light of the tensions surrounding Lavin’s construction of this marital relationship, it is worth noting that ‘The Becker Wives’ was published not long after Patrick Kavanagh’s *The Great Hunger* (1942). In

Kavanagh's poem, Patrick Maguire, the cultivator of fertility in the farmstead, is ironically the symbolically failed and barren figure of an unrealised patriarch, barred from the opportunity to have a family and offer an inheritance to his offspring. The language of this poem is base and coarse, fitting to a life of religious and social oppression, ignorance and innuendo; these are placed hand in hand to critique an Ireland of emotional and spiritual desolation. Lavin utilises the same shock tactic as Kavanagh, inverting the sterility of the single farmer in favour of the fertile married couple. This is staged within the more secure and refined milieu of a middle-class marriage. Somehow it is more shocking in her text. Can Lavin be referencing religious and state doctrine of the time in explicitly connecting the Becker women to the biological determinant of their sex, thus highlighting a specific type of social coercion experienced by women? Or is the focus on old Bartholomew's innate response to his wife a more complex marker of the limitations of his own social level? Both questions have value. Yet despite the early semantics of biological entrapment in 'The Becker Wives', as the narrative shifts time-scale, the conditions of pregnancy and motherhood are elevated. It would be too simple to label the Becker women as completely disempowered; the conservatism of the family as a whole is offered later, ironically, as freedom itself.

The middle-class sensibilities passed on to the younger women by Anna are at the heart of all that Theobald abhors. Extrinsic markers of architectural decline, threadbare clothing and poor health that drive the fictional depiction of poverty in 'A Happy Death' are transformed here in order to make proportionate the increased level of wealth and status in the novella. Rather than empathising with the plight of the Becker family too soon, the repeated focus on social standing and prosperity

forges an emotional distance between the reader, the Becker women and Theobald, firmly located within a middle-class environment. A series of descriptors assigned to the Becker women compound a particular sense of unofficial censure and social delicacy. Once the Becker sisters-in-law, Charlotte and Julia, become pregnant, for instance, they ‘found it advisable to conceal their condition under massive fur coats’: this is followed post-partum by ‘fur capelets and tippets’ rendering them even more like a herd of breeding cows with their close proximity to animal skins; finally after Anna’s death, as ‘replicas’ of her they would sit in public, ‘fat, heavy and furred’, joined by their sister-in-law, Henrietta (‘The Becker Wives’, p. 13). Structurally the repeated figurative linkage between bovine and human compounds the picture being drawn of semi-domesticated channel of food and reproduction. It pre-emptly later contrasts between Becker sturdiness and the insubstantial frame of Flora. This sturdiness is a condition of social conformity as well as reproduction. Later in the novella, Honoria, Samuel’s fiancée, is ironically recalled as a ‘plump, well-fed figure, furred and beribboned as much as any matron’ (‘The Becker Wives’, p. 34) by Henrietta Becker herself, who is seemingly unaware of the irony. The allusion to the farmyard through an increasing semantic field of animal-like associations underscores a sense of confinement amongst the women. The metaphorical association between the pregnant women and cows connotes private and public ownership, with husbands and farmers literally increasing their stock and its value. A reading one stage further might suggest the female form literally wearing dead animal skins comes dangerously close to redundant metamorphosis, from sentient human being to lifeless and skinned carcass, notwithstanding the significance of fashion and social status. Drawing on Patricia Coughlan’s essay ‘Bog Queens’, these natural images associated with Becker femininity can be read as allying themselves

to the idealisation of icons of domesticity within a history of Irish rural life that involves the silenced and passive woman. They play with the allegorical representation of Ireland as woman.<sup>33</sup>

The analogy with farmyard animals is referenced during a family dinner at a restaurant where, the narrator intrusively tells the reader, ‘in that noisy, unselfconscious gathering, the Beckers stood out conspicuous by their very unobtrusiveness’ (‘The Becker Wives’, p. 16). Theobald observes his brothers and their wives: he is not ashamed of them but rather it is the pedestrian nature of their lives that he dislikes. The women sit cow-like, ‘solid and silent, their mouths moving as they chewed their food, but their eyes immobile as they stared at whoever at that moment was fascinating their gaze’ (‘The Becker Wives’, p. 16), whilst Theobald’s brothers become distracted as they look across ‘the intervening bulks of their respective wives’ rather than focusing on their own social group. The use of a derogatory plural noun, ‘bulks’, highlights their size, and broadens the farmyard analogies. The reader is left in no doubt of the younger son’s distaste for their behaviour: the Becker family’s observations of The Chief Justice and his wife, minor celebrities within the social hierarchy of the narrative, frustrate Theobald. He concludes that his family are gaping at them ‘[a]s if they were a different race of beings; some species of animal at which they were permitted to stare’ (‘The Becker Wives’, p. 18). Interestingly, the subjects of the observations are also reviewed by Theobald utilising the lexis of the farmyard, in the noun ‘animal’. The Becker family he locates as submissive observers. Later in the narrative when the family are

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<sup>33</sup> Patricia Coughlan, ‘Bog Queens: The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney’, *Gender in Irish Writing*, ed. by Toni O’Brien and David Cairns (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), pp. 88-111 (p. 90).

first introduced to Flora similar silences and observations take place, but more from shock than awe.

There is a change of pace in the narrative once a complication in the form of Theobald's fiancée is introduced to the Becker family. Flora is everything that the Becker women are not and Lavin constructs a fantasy image of Flora through figurative language designed to attract and then unsettle the reader. The reader is bombarded with an assortment of images: notably, there are at least twenty-eight references to birds and Flora within the narrative, which Marie Arndt suggests marks the 'exilic'.<sup>34</sup> This supposes a truly independent woman, with some control over her own destiny but the reality of Flora's condition is more complicated than that. These images shift emphasis to more powerful feline comparisons in the closing stages of 'The Becker Wives'. In her preface to the first edition of *Selected Stories*, Lavin acknowledges the marked presence of birds in her stories, but ascribes a certain fanciful independence to them, where '[n]umerous as midges they flew about the pages, now flashing a wing, now trilling a note, now dropping a feather'.<sup>35</sup> She claimed to be unaware for a long time of the true extent of the inclusion of bird imagery, if it is to be believed that a writer so conscientious about revisions and constructive accuracy can be so.

When Henrietta Becker first discovers Theobald's intention to bring Flora to Samuel's engagement dinner, he comments 'Flora doesn't eat as much as a bird' ('The Becker Wives', p. 33); the final word echoes in Henrietta's head and a series of

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<sup>34</sup> Marie Arndt, 'Narratives of Internal Exile in Mary Lavin's Short Stories', *International Journal of English Studies*, 2:2 (2002), 109-122 (p. 121).

<sup>35</sup> Lavin, 'Preface' to *Selected Stories* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959), p. viii.

dynamic phrases follows literally inscribing the process of characterisation on the page. These features collectively establish a false sense of the woman:

As Theobald spoke of her birdy appetite Henrietta's imagination rose with a beat of wings and gaudy images of brilliantly plumed birds [suggesting] a small birdlike creature as volatile as a lark, so light and airy [...] a chaffinch perhaps; a summer warbler; a minute creature with yellowy golden hair.

('The Becker Wives', p. 33)

Both the reader and Henrietta are dazzled by her own imagination with the active depiction of an as yet unknown Flora. Yet the adjective, 'volatile', foreshadows the problematic behaviour of this new member of the circle, and creates an immediate association of impermanence and fickleness.

The false sense is heightened into a fantasy figure when Samuel meets Flora for the first time at his engagement dinner. He 'covertly' observes her with 'genuine admiration', despite the close proximity of his fiancée and the nature of the social occasion which Flora has entered ('The Becker Wives', p. 44). The narrative intrusion into Samuel's mind allows us to observe discordant activity between the realism of Flora as she enters the room, and the filmic fantasy clip akin to a twenty-first century advertising campaign for cosmetics or chocolate. Samuel objectifies Flora as an object of desire. His initial vision of her is restricted to an 'absurd [picture of] a young girl in a long white dress, with bare feet, and a yellow mane of hair, who in a flowery meadow, skipped and frisked about' ('The Becker Wives', p. 44). She is actually dressed in 'her trim little suit and her little black shoes tied with trim little black leather bows' ('The Becker Wives', p. 44). The narrative points us to a very particular binary construction: to set up experience against inexperience,



mature woman against youth in the figure of Flora. Significantly, this tension is housed within the space of a transient male fantasy. The reality of Flora's presence is bound within the exterior trappings of adulthood. The resonances of Flora's set of clothes connote measure and containment, so at first glance she does not pose a threat. However, allowing her to intrude into the private interior of Samuel's consciousness in an opportunistic and sexualised manner suggests a certain independence from social convention for both Samuel and Flora. Almost immediately Samuel begins to trade Flora's fragrance (literal and metaphorical) against his fiancée Henrietta, who 'never wore perfume' ('The Becker Wives', p. 44).

Patricia Meszaros argues that Flora represents 'the lure of a world of imagination [and not] sensual gratification' here, but Samuel's immediate, almost visceral, response to Flora suggests far more.<sup>36</sup> Meszaros' reading of 'The Becker Wives' is cogent, detailed and persuasive as it places Flora within a long history of 'mythic patterns' surrounding the *femme fatale* figure. However, in explicitly marking Flora as 'not sexually destructive' in defence of her argument, she fails to take into account the extent to which Lavin herself is pushing against social mores in her fictions.<sup>37</sup> 'Sarah' and 'The Nun's Mother' make similar inroads. Flora is a complicated protagonist: her function as an infertile woman, an artist, and an emotionally and psychologically unbalanced newcomer to the family, is undoubtedly to disrupt the fictional status quo. Even her name sets her apart from the other Becker women, but legitimately anticipated associations with the etymology of that name fail fully to materialise. Flora was the goddess of flowers in Roman

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<sup>36</sup> Patricia K. Meszaros, 'Woman as Artist: The Fiction of Mary Lavin', *Critique*, 24:1 (1982), 39-54 (p. 46).

<sup>37</sup> Meszaros, 'Woman as Artist', p. 49.

mythology, and such pagan associations would truly separate this Flora, through an organic semiotic link, from Catholic Ireland. Links to Saint Flora, whose spiritual meditations are framed within recorded events of illusions and miracles, are more viable, in light of Flora's own transformations. But these links sit uneasily as she does not function as a catalyst for religious change.

Flora arrives at the dinner '[p]erched on Theobald's arm, or rather hanging from it [...] the very image of the little chaffinch type of thing' ('The Becker Wives', p. 38), an artful construction on Lavin's part. She is portrayed as physically delicate, 'exceedingly small and fine-boned' ('The Becker Wives', p. 38), intimating that she is fragile and vulnerable, in sharp contrast to the bulk and solidity of the rest of the Becker women. Her features are presented in such a way that it is impossible to read about Flora without imagining her poised to fly away. The idea that 'the excited beating of her heart [requires some means] to beat her wings, or flutter her feathers, or even to clutch her perch' ('The Becker Wives', p. 39) elevates the metaphor beyond simple comparison. Any reading of the text has to acknowledge a sense of entrapment here, and an unnecessary agitation emerging from Flora, but whether that is a fully conscious awareness of an absence of autonomy is debateable. This compounded imagery inculcates an atmosphere of disquiet; her hand has 'long varnished claws' ('The Becker Wives', p. 39), an image resonating with connections to a bird of prey. To be perched upon Theobald's arm suggests a complicated form of domestic relationship more in keeping with a falconer and a falcon. Her alliance to Theobald offers first courtship, then marriage, then a lunatic asylum in the narrative. What might that suggest? One reading might be that in resisting a secure sense of autonomy and stability within Flora and Theobald's relationship, Lavin

rejects any notion of marriage as an easy option in Ireland during the 1930s and 1940s. In 'The Becker Wives', Theobald's desire to be different from other members of his family can only be achieved at the expense of another, Flora. Yet the other Becker marriages do not provide straightforward examples of independence either.

The solidity of the other Becker women, that is Anna, Henrietta, Charlotte, Julia and Honoria, is also framed in direct opposition to Flora when it comes to personal choices made with possessions. Flora refuses to have an engagement ring and there is unease amongst the women that she may in fact refuse to acknowledge her new status by not having a wedding ring either. Both Charlotte and Julia are clearly identified through the signifiers of 'thick bands of gold [with] big solitaires each set in a thick gold claw' ('The Becker Wives', p. 47). These monosyllabic pre-modifiers serve two purposes: they actively slow the pace of the reading, adding greater semantic stress, and they reinforce the economic privilege afforded to the Beckers. The signified, that is the conceptual outcome of their jewellery in relation to reader experience, is fore-grounded and flagged as potentially charged. Marriage is offered as a weighty undertaking. Ostentatious markers provoke public recognition. Without labouring the point too much, Lavin suggests virtue in the weightless modernity of Theobald's new life with Flora. This weightlessness is allied to the modernity of artistic expression that she brings to the family, a delicacy and fragility beyond the Beckers' experience.

Flora rejects the convention of house ownership, preferring to rent an apartment. Flora revels in the purchase of the new, the modern, where before the Becker wives had come to realise the market value of acknowledged antiques in

contemporary terms, the security of familiar objects at each other's houses that they themselves had given as gifts, and the choosing of presents for each other of similar provenance. Orla Fitzpatrick marks these tokens of esteem as strengthening 'family bonds' and points out that the Crown Derby service given by James and his wife Charlotte to Ernest and Julia on their wedding day was a 'popular and traditional wedding present [in Ireland] in keeping with middle-class taste'.<sup>38</sup> The repeated use of the china service on family occasions would therefore reinforce the close-knit circumstances of the Beckers. Flora's choices could be argued as new purchases that would eventually become, as she says, antiques of the future. However, their lack of assured origin, and the suggested impermanence of the pieces that she gets disputes that claim. When Samuel tells his wife Honoria to purchase a large canvas, the artist's signature is the only thing 'intelligible' on it. The rest of the family, following suit, did not anticipate the same enjoyment in their new purchases as they had of old, they felt insecure: '[o]ne and all the family felt they had not altogether entered into the dangerous new knowledge that Flora had opened up for them' ('The Becker Wives', p. 47). Flora breaks away from the Becker traditions, and consequently alters their way of life.

The particularities of a family under pressure are exposed and the objects that are accepted or rejected by them feature significantly in the debate surrounding tradition and modernity in this narrative. Flora's rejection of the permanence of old things offers significant critical value; Bill Brown's concern with what he terms the possession or 'having' of a particular object and identification of self with object or 'being' is bound up in various ways with the entire Becker family's sense of who

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<sup>38</sup> Orla Fitzpatrick, 'The Material Culture of Marriage: What Wedding Gifts Can Tell Us about 1940s Dublin', *Éire-Ireland*, 46:1 & 2 (Spring/Summer 2011), 177-193 (p. 180).

they are.<sup>39</sup> This notion of ‘being’ is embedded within the text of ‘The Becker Wives’. The sisters-in-law demonstrate a substantially different level of emotional and social investment to Flora; Charlotte and Julia have become the signified, that is, the conceptual nature of their jewellery by referencing the state of marriage, of societal and religious expectations and of familial inheritance. The suggested impermanence of the modernist abstract art pieces that Flora purchases foreshadows the limited connection that Flora will have with the Beckers, and with reality. The slippage between ‘having’ and ‘being’ that Brown is interested in, is played out between the established unit of the Beckers and the newcomer Flora. This slippage is a paradox created within the character of Flora in that she does desire the ‘having’ of objects but only those of a particular nature, those that have themselves not yet accumulated the historical baggage and metaphorical weight of antiquity and social allegiance. The Beckers on the other hand, up to the point of Flora’s introduction, consolidate through habitual behaviour and common consensus, which keeps chaos at bay. There are faint echoes here of the perverted accumulation of possessions that Shibby Pindy (Isabella Prendeville) relies on to make an established legitimate connection with Inver House for herself and her half-brother Kit in *The Big House of Inver*, but of course here in ‘The Becker Wives’ this authority is already present in their own household. What unites both families in both narratives is their reliance on the acquisition of material things to gain access to a social stratum always just out of reach.

Brown’s study of objects and their relationship to history provides a point of critical leverage here. He poses questions about how objects are used to make

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<sup>39</sup> Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 13.

meaning, and notes the pairing of individuals in literature with objects. Brown invites readers to consider the strategy of ‘ideas embedded in things’.<sup>40</sup> There is a significant relationship between these concerns and my evaluation of Lavin’s ‘The Becker Wives’. In particular, what Brown calls ‘the metonymic trace’ evolving from the tactile association of humans and objects, acts as a barometer for the religious and social expectations of the married women in ‘The Becker Wives’ when linked to the wedding rings that the Becker women wear and that Flora rejects.<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, Brown works out his theory in part through a reading of the work of American regionalist writer Sarah Orne Jewett. Jewett was a writer that Lavin admired, citing her as an important influence on her own work.<sup>42</sup> In his chapter entitled ‘Regional Artifacts’, Brown offers a thought-provoking reading of Jewett’s fiction in that he highlights the prominence of objects in her work. In relating object association to the presence of Jewett herself, ‘metonymically’ this creates an illusion of Jewett ‘by those things that she consciously and unconsciously touched’.<sup>43</sup> Whilst this illusion of the writer or artist is problematic in that it is a recreated sense of another, as Brown suggests, linking the empirical material content of cultural artefacts to grasp anthropological insights has value, as indicated in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

Jewett is celebrated as a regionalist, a categorisation attributable to Lavin to some extent, yet it could be argued that this means she is imaginatively curtailed or externally categorised by parochial limitations. However, the following comments suggest a broader remit that sits more comfortably with readings of Lavin’s work:

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<sup>40</sup> Brown, *A Sense of Things*, p. 84.

<sup>41</sup> Brown, *A Sense of Things*, p. 93.

<sup>42</sup> Mary Lavin, ‘Writer at Work’, *St Stephens*, 12 (Trinity Term 1967), 19-22 (p. 22).

<sup>43</sup> Brown, *A Sense of Things*, p. 82.

Just as the genre of regionalism provided new access to the literary scene for a demographically diverse generation of American writers, so too for Jewett regionalist writing was meant to promote access to more than merely regionalist thinking – and access to something like a transcultural and transhistorical “human condition”.<sup>44</sup>

Jewett’s work can be connected to Lavin’s not necessarily only by style but by a sense of local colour, which enables rather than denigrates the small town community. Both offer fiction worthy of sustained attention; each presents detail on the minutiae of life which acts out the big dramas on a small stage, validating the regional over the national voice while remaining vitally conscious of the relationship between the two. Understanding Lavin’s interest in an American writer who played such a significant role in the formation of her own style has some bearing on the analysis of ‘The Becker Wives’, if provincial concerns are being addressed on both sides of the Atlantic.

In ‘The Becker Wives’ a sense of the past is signified through the antiques belonging to the Becker family, the future belonging to the modernist canvases and unintelligible poetry written by Flora. Does Lavin purport to be a curator of the past as Brown seems to suggest Jewett is? Indeed, Lavin is recording a schism in Irish history, writing a realist picture to engage readers. She offers a given value for small town economies rather than dismissing the traditional as being outdated. This suggestion of social currency in subject-matters, rather than obsolescence, is at the heart of Lavin’s fiction. However, she is also acknowledging a genuine fear of change in divorcing Flora from the very particularities of tradition. This is ultimately

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<sup>44</sup> Brown, *A Sense of Things*, p. 83.

achieved through Flora's final metamorphic shift: ostensibly it allows her to break free, but as this is limited to a vulnerable freedom through mental breakdown, it is charged with dystopian resonances. Flora's modernist aesthetic, that is her break with traditional art forms, furniture, downshifting in property, even the signifier of marital obligation, a wedding ring, symbolises the presence of a very real social fragmentation through one individual. It shifts against the religious and social conventions of mid-twentieth century Ireland. The drive for progression is undercut with a caveat – that the move may not be productive.

Certain possessions are considered visible proof of social standing in the middle-class Becker family; they live comfortably and their surroundings offer testimony to their financial security. Successful accumulation of wealth is exhibited publicly through their possessions; yet it is more complex than that. Despite their grandiose home environment the Beckers imitate, rather than come naturally to, good taste. Early on in the narrative, on James' wedding day, his mother Anna admires the surroundings in which the family relax at the wedding table where a:

big ormolu sideboard was laden with bottles of wines and liqueurs, and gleaming with the silver and gilt caps of the various vintage champagnes from the cellar laid down by old Bartholomew [with] the silver bracketed *epergne* in the centre of the bridal table. ('The Becker Wives', p. 11)

The large ornamented sideboard is brass-covered, not gold-leafed. Such furniture, particularly in the French design, was popular in the late nineteenth century. Its place in the dining room acts as a formal declaration of all that the Becker family aspires to but may not yet have achieved or fully understood. The silver centrepiece (*epergne*) would have contained flutes of silver or glass that would have held



flowers, sweets or serve purely for decorative purposes. Again these pieces were French in origin, suggesting this European influence as a sign of modernity. Lavin secures this frame by introducing ‘*Veuve Cliquot*’ as the brand of choice for their champagne.

This family is well-placed in the mercantile economy, open to some new experiences whilst at the same time needing the stability that large-scale investment pieces could provide as markers of respectability. Their insecurities and desires are concretely located in their material goods. Drawing on Raymond Williams’ suggestion that ‘[e]very aspect of personal life is radically affected by the quality of the general life, yet the general life is seen at its most important in completely personal terms’, the Beckers can be seen to respond to, and connect with, their interpretation of what constitutes business and social success.<sup>45</sup> This conceptual framework of household assets as status symbols is also located in ‘The Will’ (1944), where a ‘large red mahogany table’ (‘The Will’, p. 7) symbolises the expectation of family inheritance after a mother’s funeral. The implied value of Mrs Conroy’s estate there is bound up in that expensive piece of furniture; as the Conroy siblings stand around it, the table serves as a common link to those family members who will benefit from their mother’s death. Only one member of the family, Lally, has been left out of the will and stands at a distance near the front door. We can deduce that the inheritance will be substantial as the others do not wish to part with too much of their share.

Flora’s influence on the Becker family is noteworthy. Although the Becker women draw the line at replacing their jewellery, some vases, china dogs and

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<sup>45</sup> Raymond Williams, ‘Realism and the Contemporary Novel’, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*, ed. by David Lodge (London; New York: Longman, 1991), pp. 581-591 (p. 584).

watercolours are given away by Honoria for instance, as a result of the influence of Flora's critical eye. A statue of Buddha is also passed on to the washerwoman by Henrietta; she could not go so far as to throw it away. Whilst not apparently a major decision, this de-cluttering was something very new for the Becker family, and initially it would appear that it was liberating. The reader has been led to understand a certain sense of complacency amongst the fortunate merchant family from their listed possessions such as the heavy 'furs and jewellery' ('The Becker Wives', p. 14). The 'big ormolu clock' and 'old Georgian service' ('The Becker Wives', p. 48) are genuine antiques, weighty and expensive. But the solidity of these items becomes a burden rather than a gift. The restrictive aura of possession is a metaphor for cultural responsibility, and the Becker family one by one reject the various comforts in favour of the promise of something new. Regular formal dinners out become more select gatherings, trips are impromptu rather than planned, and Flora's artistry in mimicking others acts as a diversion from the predictable entertainments of old.

However, the changes made to their lives arrive too speedily, and the pace of the narrative increases to mirror this once Flora is established as a member of the family. The imagery associated with Flora quickly alters to encompass the following: elemental qualities of fire, 'like a flame', an alien being, 'like a creature from another planet', and the feline, 'Lithe as a cat [with claws] sharp as the claws of a tigress' ('The Becker Wives', pp. 52, 71). These erratic multiple associations mirror the uncertainty of her own behaviour. Flora's destructive association with flame imagery in particular diminishes any positive descriptors assigned to her like 'vivid [and] vital' ('The Becker Wives', p. 52). The impact of her theatrical

performance in acting out the part of a flame after Theobald reveals his frustration at her conduct on their honeymoon, is only curtailed when he issues the imperative 'Stop it, Flora' ('The Becker Wives', pp. 53); then she is extinguished and can ground herself again. The theatricality of Flora's behaviour is evident from the moment of her arrival, and in some way the inevitable response of the family to her was made known earlier to the reader when the Beckers were out to dinner and 'focussed on a group of theatrical people' ('The Becker Wives', p. 17) rather than their own group. Their obvious interest there creates a distance between themselves and Theobald, who is seeking to distract them from the other diners. Later at Flora's initial meeting with the family she pretends to photograph them all in turn, and in a farcical episode adopts the guise of a photographer and captures them in more ways than one. The traditionally grounded, emotionally unworldly Becker family are riveted by her performance.

Much as a child would play at being an adult, or an actor would assume a character for public performance, Flora decides to take centre stage and adopts the role of photographer. The noun 'role' might denote the acting-out of a real situation but we gain an insight into the problematic psychology of Flora as she behaves with great seriousness, as 'she spoke severely' ('The Becker Wives', p. 43) when responding to Julia and Ernest, who did not appear to take the mock photography session seriously. It is revealing that she genuinely appears to be upset at the frivolity her performance creates; from the moment she wistfully says 'I wish I were a photographer' ('The Becker Wives', p. 41) and somehow alters her stature to be perceived as male and a professional photographer, she transfixes the family. Not only does she become the practitioner, she fuses with the equipment, as 'her yellow

hair fell over her face just like a camera-man's black curtain' ('The Becker Wives', p. 41), and her hands and eyes melt into the form of camera lenses. Flora becomes the agent of change through a metamorphosis: she governs the responses of the family by manipulating their space and reactions, whilst creating the illusion that they are all in a photographer's studio. In addition, her role as an observer and practitioner divorces her somewhat from the other guests, compounding the distinction between tradition and modernity that arises around her newly emerging situation within the family.

Theobald's keenness to promote her difference is out of character. Despite a measured start, he embarks on a series of declaratives where he extols her genius: 'she's so amazing [...] She's wonderful [...] I always say her real talent is for acting. She is a wonderful mimic' ('The Becker Wives, p. 43). His enthusiasm includes an almost throwaway comment, 'You've no idea how people stare at us wherever we go' ('The Becker Wives, p. 43); that notoriety which is so welcome to Theobald is in fact an indicator of Flora's social separation from reality. There is legitimate public recognition as she is a member of an old family, yet this does not explain all reactions to her behaviour. In fact, Flora's behaviour notably separates her from the established practices and conventions of tradition and intimates some background crisis prior to her arrival at the Becker household. Theobald's use of the noun 'mimic' suggests unsuccessful or ridiculous imitation of others, not a professional portrayal for entertainment such as an actor might provide. Seemingly innocent parlour tricks suggest that Flora is a fractured personality; there is genuine talent alongside malevolent trickery. Eventually when leaving the party Flora cannot seem

to let go of the drama, confusing even Theobald when she persists in packing up her fictional equipment.

Other theatrical moments are equally fraught; during and after her honeymoon the emergence of the green dragon scenario is met with mixed responses. This is a recurring set of circumstances where Flora interacts with a dragon that is invisible to everyone else. At the hotel some of the guests feel that the joke had gone too far, social proprieties have been overstepped, when she re-imagined the dragon's appearance too often, accepting his presence almost as a domestic pet. However, it is a novelty for the Becker family and they delight in the exhibition once Flora chooses to allow the display to go ahead. Part of her precocity is to delay matters for dramatic effect, or at least it appears to be that way to Theobald. As a result of her deterioration it could be perceived as her fantasy dominating the time-scale by genuinely waiting for a mythical creature to appear. At this stage in the narrative, the reader cannot be certain, but the evidence within the text suggests more than artistic creativity.

The most chilling performance comes over a period of time and even the normally placid Beckers become concerned at what they see. This is a second complication to the narrative, driving it towards crisis. Flora alters the dynamics of her performances increasingly to focus on one person, Samuel's wife, Honoria, who is now pregnant with their first child. Honoria is a new generation's embodiment of the State and Church ideal. It is Julia who first declares her unease, having noticed the effect on her sister-in-law. Again the narrative intrusion blurs, allowing us to visualise through the characters' eyes how they perceive each other. There is a hypercritical tenor in the narrative voice: 'It was so very comical to see a little scrap

of a person like Flora imitating with such success a big soft creature like Honoria' ('The Becker Wives, p. 63), as if the reader should not be too concerned about the ethics of impersonation. However, within a few lines of the narrative the tone alters and we see Honoria as a victim who is more likely to be the 'butt of [Flora's] humour' ('The Becker Wives', p. 63). This linguistic shift parallels Flora's own dichotomy; she is both hunted and hunter, depending on her position within the narrative, and now Honoria is Flora's prey in the final section of the text.

As the pregnancy develops, Honoria has put on weight which alters her gait; Flora begins to move around in a similar manner, emphasising the heavy tread of late pregnancy and eventually even acts like this when alone. When Charlotte calls to visit her brother-in-law she comes upon Flora walking about the drawing room, 'her hips [...] swaying' ('The Becker Wives', p. 67), and she was positive that it really was Honoria in the room. This optical illusion appears to be part of a dangerous pseudo-mass hysteria, as Ernest, James, Charlotte and Julia all begin to comment on strong similarities between the two women. Physically and emotionally this would seem to be unrealistic – Lavin has painted clear pictures of these characters and so this improbable scenario has sinister overtones.

Where Honoria wears her coat unbuttoned for practical reasons, so does Flora. She speaks for Honoria, imposing her own response when Samuel comes looking for his wife: she even adopts pregnancy food fads that are noticed by Charlotte and sits far out from the table and the piano as if her girth prevented closer movement. Overall she invades Honoria's legitimate position in a ludicrous way considering the smallness of her own physique. The shocking climax to this intrusive behaviour comes as Flora cannot move outside of the fantasy. Having

learnt that Honoria was crying unobserved, Julia tackles Samuel about Flora. He is forced to confront her but when he attempts to engage her in discussion she refuses to acknowledge his presence. Part of him may well feel affronted at this – after all he had been Flora’s ally, he felt he knew her better even than her husband, and so now he is dependent on Julia and Charlotte to support his intervention. When in the denouement of the tale Flora is cornered in the breakfast room after behaving strangely towards Samuel, the role she has adopted falls apart, she appears to be completely subsumed by the *character* of Honoria, even denying her own name.

This is where Flora’s status as hunter is reversed; she becomes the embodiment of a wild animal cornered and echoes Bertha Mason, the madwoman in the attic, perhaps not summarily confined but most definitely divorced from reality.<sup>46</sup> Just as suddenly as Lavin creates a ferocious and seemingly unstoppable force in this woman, she allows her to collapse into a real madness. Lavin recalls this section of the novella in an interview with Eavan Boland; the point at which Flora is identifiably ‘insane’ moved Lavin to tears.<sup>47</sup> Lavin recollects ‘I had got so deeply into that life that for the moment it seemed just as real as the room in which I sat’.<sup>48</sup> For the reader this moment is equally shocking. The tone of Flora’s voice vacillates between enraged shouting and a pathetic whisper when she shakes and fumbles in her attempt to self-validate through a written statement of her name. The power of the written word is such that Flora feels she cannot exist rationally without her name inscribed as a permanent record: she becomes an absent-presence, but ironically Lavin does not permit the reader or the Becker family to identify which name is on

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<sup>46</sup> Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre* [1947] (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1974).

<sup>47</sup> Eavan Boland, ‘Mary Lavin Talking With Eavan Boland’, *Writing Lives: Conversations Between Women Writers*, ed. by Mary Chamberlain (London: Virago Press, 1988), pp. 138-145 (p. 142).

<sup>48</sup> Boland, p. 142.

the paper. This is a similar artifice to that included in ‘Sarah’ where Kathleen Kedrigan retrieves a poison pen letter and passes it on to Sarah’s brothers. Both hidden texts exclude the reader. Flora turns to Samuel, in a last attempt to prevent incarceration, waving the paper; speaking in the third person she reveals the genealogy of madness that she has kept hidden from Theobald since they met. The strategy of retreat into madness could be argued as the only viable choice available to Flora at this time. Meszaros considers Flora’s behaviour to be a tactic of resistance; through her madness she can escape ‘the frustratingly conventional environment into which she has married’.<sup>49</sup> Meszaros contends that as Flora adopts another’s identity it is as a result of her inability ‘to sustain her lonely artistic selfhood’.<sup>50</sup>

However, there is a codicil to this reading; as Elaine Showalter argues, this notion of the unconsciously rebellious madwoman suggests some empowerment, when in reality the madness ‘is a desperate communication of the powerless’.<sup>51</sup> This means the figure of Flora is problematic in that she is a woman that is barren, insubstantial and far from lucid. As an ‘alien’ she is disenfranchised, as a ‘creature’ she will have lost all sense of human female experience, and so will have very little to lose when faced with other female adversaries. Finally, as a ‘tigress’ she has moved beyond the passive, can no longer be seen as domesticated; her responses are aggressive, defensive and protective of a man with whom she does not have a valid relationship. Alongside this seemingly futile challenge to the orthodoxy of mid-century Catholic Ireland, she embodies the specific struggle that women face defining themselves and legitimising their own voice.

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<sup>49</sup> Meszaros, ‘Woman as Artist’, p. 49.

<sup>50</sup> Meszaros, ‘Woman as Artist’, p. 50.

<sup>51</sup> Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980* (London: Virago Press, 1991), p. 5.



Lavin encodes a warning in ‘The Becker Wives’ that if change is made too quickly it is not always valid: if it is not thought through or lacks consistency, then it has limited merit. In the latter stages of the novella, we see far fewer references to the material culture of middle-class life: far more emphasis is placed on the intrinsic reality of the continuity and stability of family life. That continuity is referenced within the maintenance of allegiance to the same social cluster into which one is born. This should not read as support of social engineering, but ‘The Becker Wives’ does suggest that moving vertically, in either direction, may result in a temporary redefinition of one’s relationship to cultural capital. That shift is posited as challenging. In simple terms this is played out through Flora’s presumed familiarity with appropriate cultural art forms and modernity, and how that could not be comfortably transferred to the Becker family. Even their own understanding of what constituted a valid antique had to be learnt. In fact, the Beckers had to rely on Mr Keyes, an antique dealer, for recommendations, and those purchases sometimes ‘missed the mark’. Ultimately, the Becker family had inherited money and a sense of their own importance that became too oppressive even for them. Theobald, then the rest of the family, sought new challenges through Flora. In the end even that goal was beyond their reach. Far from living the ‘high social comedy’ of a family that Marianne Koenig suggests, each member of the Beckers embodies the tragedy of an individual trapped by his or her birthright.<sup>52</sup> This is as true of Flora and the implied notion of a restricted gene pool that culminates in her insanity, as it is for the Becker family and their dull, commonplace lives.

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<sup>52</sup> Marianne Koenig, ‘Mary Lavin: The Novels and the Stories’, *Irish University Review*, 9:2 (Autumn 1979), 244-261 (p. 253).

Despite these setbacks, this is not a fiction that endorses stagnation; there are distinctions that suggest not all change is cause for unease. Nevertheless, how those changes manifest themselves, are received and interpreted is at the heart of 'The Becker Wives'. For example, whilst the obvious physical transformations arise in the Becker women as they progress through pregnancy and motherhood, and this holds an uneasy dynamic in the extrinsic labelling, their active creation of a new dynasty is positive. However, where Samuel falls from grace in buying into the avant-garde is in his immediate attraction to Flora, the symbolic manifestation of modernity who is everything that his wife Honoria is not. His grasp of the delicate balance between friendship and courtship is limited. His insensitivity in withdrawing so rapidly from Honoria once she is pregnant is euphemistically fore-grounded by Lavin, in that 'it was likely that he would be without the company of Honoria for the next few months' ('The Becker Wives', p. 48). There are various readings of this, not just as his companion at home or on social outings, but there is an undercurrent or frisson suggesting that maybe Samuel is placed as a quasi-adulterer, as a potential sexual partner for Flora.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the final resolution stages of the narrative. After Flora's outburst Samuel panders to her madness, soothing her as he might his wife: 'Hush hush, Honoria!' ('The Becker Wives', p. 76) he repeats in a misguided attempt to diffuse the situation. His words frighten the Beckers listening outside; the implication is that Samuel has moved beyond acceptable social boundaries and failed Honoria and the family. However, within the confines of the room Samuel thinks more globally, seeing the Becker family as having lost their opportunity to forge ahead in another place. This discord highlights the fact that at

the end of the narrative an ominous fatality awaits all the family: 'Their brief journey into another world had been rudely cut short. They had merely glimpsed its strange and exciting vistas as from afar' ('The Becker Wives', p. 76). They will have the supposed security and solidity of the family to offer comfort, but to some extent no-one will trust that structure fully again. At least they had attempted to transform their lives, albeit briefly.

'The Becker Wives' is unmatched by any other fiction in Lavin's body of work. Its publication in the 1940s, Lavin's early and most innovative period, suggests it speaks not just for the moment of its conception, but for the period of its completion and circulation in Irish literary fiction. Critical readings of this novella agree on its core focus on social dislocation, as highlighted earlier. This is in accord with a deep mistrust of rapid change that Lavin suggests is present at some level in Ireland at that time. Lavin's own words about producing fictions that utter some truth about what she observes resonate deeply in this text. What 'The Becker Wives' powerfully demonstrates is a challenge, not only to the status quo but to the mode of challenge itself. The novella form requires stamina, both in its reading but more importantly, in its conception and construction. What Lavin opened up most eloquently to the reader in these longer early fictions, is an appreciation of the investment that she was prepared to put into her writing. Although it would take some time for this to be fully understood, both in terms of the sheer volume of manuscripts and the time lapse between the genesis of a story and its eventual publication, novellas such as 'A Happy Death' and 'The Becker Wives' offer early indications of her commitment.

## Chapter 5

### Taking Stock

In 1951 Lorna Reynolds, a contemporary of Lavin's at UCD, recalled that '[s]he it was who discovered for us that it is only one's contemporaries who ever listen to one, and who now began to address herself to contemporaries, and elders and betters alike'.<sup>1</sup> This suggests Lavin was developing a pragmatic and fearless professional strategy in the 1930s and early 1940s as far as Reynolds was concerned, and yet, as Lavin's correspondence reveals, there are still moments of deep insecurity surrounding the pressure of whether her work was appreciated, or commercially viable. Lavin's belief in the craft of writing did not seem in doubt, neither was her appreciation of the authority of the short story.

Such tensions between the public and private interface of her professional success can be traced empirically over the course of her career: various seemingly spontaneous and light-hearted responses to questions about her fiction that she made in later interviews deflected attention away from artistic and personal insecurity. She has spoken casually of reading criticism as 'a kind of recreation [...] like reading detective stories' yet was anxious about how her own work was received: when told her writing adopted 'a modern theological view' that was surprising, she suggested it was because 'I'm out of Ireland a lot! Forgive me! I was joking!'<sup>2</sup> Private correspondence between herself and the Bird family, as well as long-term associations with artists and writers such as Elizabeth Cullinan, Eudora Welty, James Stern, and Howard Gotlieb, for instance, reveals a great deal about periods where she

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<sup>1</sup> Lorna Reynolds, 'Thirty Years of Irish Letters', *Studies*, 40:160 (Dec 1951), pp. 457-468 (pp. 464-5) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/30099873>> [accessed 3/2/10].

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Murphy, 'Mary Lavin: An Interview', *Irish University Review*, Mary Lavin Special Issue, 9:2 (Autumn 1979), 207-224 (pp. 219-220).

lacked self-belief, felt marginalised or was having financial worries. Reynolds' assertion that Lavin had enough faith in her capabilities to target specific demographic tranches is, however, supported by Lavin's success in gaining academic bursaries, as shown in the Introduction, as well as her roles in public office. Amongst other accolades, Lavin had been invited to join the Irish Academy of Letters in 1951 following the death of the Irish poet James Stephens.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of her insecurities, Lavin's reputation was growing. For instance, letters from Michael McLaverty to friends and associates suggest an ongoing interest in her work: he remarks 'at no time do we feel that there is falsification or romanticising of the material' in her short stories, so even at this stage Lavin's quest for authentic representation is noted by others.<sup>4</sup> The *New York Times* Best Sellers list highlighted *Mary O'Grady* as of 'particular literary, topical or scholarly interest' alongside *Coming Up for Air* by George Orwell.<sup>5</sup> In 1957 Lavin's children's tale *Likely Story* was advertised in the *New York Times* Macmillan Christmas list, and this pattern of transatlantic reviews and marketing continues with subsequent collections.<sup>6</sup> Her growing importance as an Irish writer was undeniable, even if she did not always recognise it. Public tribute in Ireland was paid to Lavin in the presentation of an honorary doctorate from UCD. In his introduction at the award ceremony in Iveagh House on 28 March, Justice John Kenny said:

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<sup>3</sup> The General Press Cuttings Association, loose cutting, 'Irish Poet honoured', *The Times*, 28 May 1951, no page reference, press cuttings fol. 1: James Joyce Library.

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Horace Reynolds, 16 January 1949; *In Quiet Places: The Uncollected Stories, Letters and Critical Prose of Michael Laverty*, ed. by Sophia Hillan King (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1989), p. 129.

<sup>5</sup> *New York Times*, 19 February 1950, p. BR5: Proquest, British Library [accessed 5 November 2009].

<sup>6</sup> *New York Times*, 17 November 1957, p. BR24: Proquest, British Library [accessed 5 November 2009].

This degree is not only our tribute to her as an artist; it is also an expression of our gratitude because she has continued to live and work in Ireland. Many of our great artists have left because they did not get the appreciation which they felt they had merited. She has stayed with us and her international reputation gives happiness to her fellow graduates.<sup>7</sup>

Eamon de Valera was present at the ceremony, an irony not lost on those who read Lavin's earlier work as a critique of Ireland's administration under his leadership.

Markedly, Justice Kenny's compelling comments on the dissociation of some Irish writers from their homeland up to this time was not necessarily the perception held by those outside Ireland in later years. In a letter to Mary Lavin from Janet Dunleavy some fourteen years later, there is a sense that nationals in other countries saw Irish writers as privileged, receiving funding and encouragement.<sup>8</sup> Lavin herself drew attention to the exodus that Justice Kenny notes, just one year after the ceremony. In Des Hickey's 'Dublin Letter', her comments are recalled: 'It's understandable that without encouragement writers will continue to leave Ireland. Those who stay on may simply want to die in their own country'.<sup>9</sup> The latter segment is curiously prophetic in light of Lavin's own history, as shown later in this chapter. Lorna Reynolds, who maintained her friendship with Lavin after UCD, in 1970 was to reflect upon the conflict between Lavin as both 'a master of the miniature' [short story] and yet sadly neglected by the Irish and, this only two years after presentation of the award from UCD. Offering both compliment and lament,

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<sup>7</sup> *Irish Times*, 29 March 1968. Photograph of Eamon De Valera at the ceremony included, press cuttings fol. 1: James Joyce Library.

<sup>8</sup> Letter from Janet Dunleavy, 17 September 1982, fol. 11: James Joyce Library.

<sup>9</sup> Des Hickey, 'Dublin Letter', *Chicago Sunday Times*, 19 January 1969, no page reference, press cuttings fol. 1: James Joyce Library.

Reynolds questions whether '[p]erhaps it is because we dislike so much what we see in the mirror held up to us that Mary Lavin has not received the critical attention one would have expected from her compatriots?'<sup>10</sup> That may not hold true for a twenty-first century readership more used to explicit interpretations of life, but Lavin's fictions have the power to make strange the familiar, and that is equally unsettling.

Lavin's personal decision to live and work within the somewhat guarded environment of 1940s and 1950s Ireland unwittingly contributes to a false sense of artistic liberty and financial security about her. Lavin's decision to remain was practical, and the fictions emerging from this period suggest that she is fully conscious of the need to tailor the content and modes of expression to suit the prevailing climate. It was only later that she capitalised on international contacts for lecture tours and readings. Her fiction, whilst challenging what she saw as misrepresentations of Irish life, appears removed from censorship inspection but this owes more to the very ordinary nature of her subject-matter, the everyday, the inconsequential and to the somewhat modest manner of her critique, than to a strategy of rejecting confrontational issues. Lavin continues to engage with difficult themes throughout her career, and in so doing confronts fundamental systems of belief that are integral to Church and State. The integrity with which she deals with imbalances of power and elicits sympathy for both victim and wrongdoer, is possibly the single most defining feature of her body of work.

Although ever-conscious of creating an income, Lavin did not pursue money at the expense of this integrity. It is noteworthy that stories such as 'A Happy Death' (1946) and 'Lemonade' (1961) stand apart from the overtly subjective and personally

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<sup>10</sup> Lorna Reynolds, 'Mary Lavin: An Appreciation', *Hibernia*, 15 May 1970, p. 14.

motivated interests of contemporaneous travel impressions, for instance, and similarly agenda-driven commercial tourist literature from the Irish Tourist Association (I. T. A). Short stories ‘The Haymaking’ (1944), ‘Assigh’ (1959) and ‘In the Middle of the Fields’ (1967) consciously react against a romanticised inauthentic version of Ireland, focusing on the hard practicalities of rural living. Lavin could have joined Kate O’Brien, Sean O’Faolain and Frank O’Connor, diversifying into travel literature which was a valuable source of revenue. The interconnected (and inter-dependent in some cases) cultures of fiction and travel writing did support writers well. Thomas Dillon Redshaw points out that the Irish Tourist Board’s ‘payments for contributions to *Ireland of the Welcomes* [magazine] helped support Irish writers’.<sup>11</sup> Michael Cronin and Barbara O’Connor argue that those writers contributed a sense of legitimacy to the publication, in that their productions added ‘extra authenticity and literary value by the fact that they were written by well-known and respected literary figures of the era such as Paddy Kavanagh, Maurice Walsh, Benedict Kiely, and Walter Macken’.<sup>12</sup> Lavin chose not to follow this commercial route.

The 1950s fictions continue to explore earlier concerns about change and uncertainty, but in addition they reflect a subtle sense of stagnation in the country. Perhaps this malaise contributed to Lavin’s own desire to travel, as she journeyed to London and later Europe with her children in the latter part of the decade, but always

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Dillon Redshaw, ‘The Noble Labor of Liam Miller: Making the Dolmen Yeats Papers, 1959-1979’, *The South Carolina Review*, 34:2 (Spring 2002), 69-97 (p. 69) <[http://www.clemson.edu/cedp/cudp/scr/.../scr\\_40-1\\_redshow\\_essay.pdf](http://www.clemson.edu/cedp/cudp/scr/.../scr_40-1_redshow_essay.pdf)> [accessed 29 May 2012] (para. 1 of 21).

<sup>12</sup> Michael Cronin and Barbara O’Connor, ‘From Gombeen to Gubeen: Tourism, Identity and Class in Ireland, 1949-99’, *Writing in the Irish Republic: Literature, Culture and Politics 1949-1999*, ed. by Ray Ryan (Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), pp. 65-184 (pp. 168-9) <<http://doras.dcu.ie/14969/1/gombeen-to-gumbeen.pdf>> [accessed 10 July 2012] (para. 8 of 17).



maintained Ireland as her home. These fictions do evoke an atmosphere of Ireland characterised by contradiction: a combination of lethargy and political instability, the fallout from what Terence Brown terms in the post-war period as ‘hesitancy and uncertainty’, runs alongside religious fervour and social disenchantment.<sup>13</sup> Despite public displays of dissatisfaction there seemed little clear vision of cultural change.<sup>14</sup> The politics of unemployment, inflation, desperate poverty and infrastructure ‘black holes’ dogged the government and in rural locations families were split, as those who could, continued the significant levels of emigration which had begun in the 1940s. This demographic shift had a marked effect as Peter Somerville-Large, Terence Brown, Declan Kiberd and Bronwen Walter all note. Qualitative and quantitative studies by Breda Gray also reveal the extent to which those left at home, as well as those who emigrated, were affected by this shift.<sup>15</sup> Lavin’s fictions draw on these tensions in the 1950s collections. *A Single Lady and Other Stories* (1951), *The Patriot Son and Other Stories* (1956) and *Selected Stories* (1959) were Lavin’s only collections published in this decade, but many of her stories were in print in *Dublin Magazine*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *The New Yorker*, and *Southern Review*. Each collection maintains continuity with the 1940s body of work: a story such as ‘The Little Prince’ (1956) links thematically with ‘At Sallygap’ (*Tales from Bective Bridge*), evidencing the impact that emigration was having on families both at home and abroad, but also forms part of a sub-set of stories about one family. Breda Gray’s work is a compelling complement to Lavin’s emigration fiction, contributing an extra dimension to our reading of ‘The Little Prince’. In this short story Lavin generates

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<sup>13</sup> Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-1985* (London: Fontana Press, 1985), p. 221.

<sup>14</sup> <[http://www.irishhistorylinks.net/Irish\\_History\\_Timeline.html#1950s\\_60s](http://www.irishhistorylinks.net/Irish_History_Timeline.html#1950s_60s)> [accessed 14 January 2010].

<sup>15</sup> Breda Gray, “‘Breaking the Silence’ - Questions of Staying and Going in 1950s Ireland”, *Irish Journal of Psychology*, 23:3-4 (2002), 158-83.

frustration and sympathy in the reader towards the embittered Bedelia as she justifies her reasons for sending her brother Tom away. Gray's research reveals similar tensions amongst those interviewed relating to perceived community status and inheritance.

Fortunately, the research landscape is continually broadening: in his introduction to *The Transformation of Ireland*, Ferriter acknowledges the debt to documentary makers, economists, feminists, sociologists, fellow historians and novelists in creating a valid examination of Irish history. These forms of cultural witness offer alternative modes of constructing the complexities of historical record. For instance, Ferriter cites John McGahern and Seamus Deane who offer insightful fictional histories, alongside Frank McCourt's controversial memoir *Angela's Ashes*, hugely successful as a portrayal of one type of history.<sup>16</sup> Admittedly, Ferriter acknowledges in the latter instance a discomfort experienced by many who felt that the events were inflated, in conjunction with uneasiness about addressing the past. Yet the popular financial success of the memoir should not diminish its authority: the personal albeit anecdotal histories of a great many from an older generation provide authority for that experience in their own right. In *Writing Lives, Conversations Between Women Writers* (1988), interviews with writers Eavan Boland and Polly Devlin, Mary Lavin and Molly Keane offer glimpses into the private and public conditions of their writing.<sup>17</sup> There is some excellent qualitative research completed by Mary Lennon, Marie McAdam and Joanne O'Brien that offers the fine

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<sup>16</sup> Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London: Profile Books, 2005), pp. 1-27, pp. 5-6, p. 23.

<sup>17</sup> Mary Chamberlain, ed., *Writing Lives, Conversations Between Women Writers* (London: Virago Press, 1988), pp. 139-145, pp. 121-135.

distinctions of social experience in the lives of ordinary Irish women.<sup>18</sup> Their moving and illuminating study of emigration to Britain by Irishwomen gives space to those voices.

From a series of radio interviews in 1985 entitled *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl*, a collection of the same name was published which offers an insightful fusion of fictional and autobiographical narrative from a number of significant Irish women writers, which included Mary Lavin and Molly Keane.<sup>19</sup> Published ten years later, Eavan Boland's *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (1995) offers a wider social history, as well as an individual woman-centred chronicle.<sup>20</sup> These few examples illustrate the enormous value of alternative channels of investigation, of letting the tape run to capture and document voices and events. In addition, Louise Fuller's *Irish Catholicism since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture* (2002) offers a detailed study of Catholic Church influence over a newly emergent Ireland; it also contributes to a far greater understanding of the wider social history of the period.<sup>21</sup> What is missing in Ferriter's introductory kaleidoscope of practitioners is the short story writer, although he does return to this category later. The short story suffers from this type of second-level, delayed acknowledgement. It is vital therefore, to recognise how Lavin's fictions contribute to this diverse layering of testimony. Convincingly, Lavin's short stories substantiate recorded details and memoir histories of others as part of this collective experience, although she would never have met or known about specific individuals. The aforementioned accounts,

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<sup>18</sup> Mary Lennon, Marie McAdam and Joanne O'Brien, eds., *Across the Water: Irish Women's Lives in Britain* (London: Virago Press, 1988).

<sup>19</sup> John Quinn, ed., *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl* [1986] (London: Methuen, 1987).

<sup>20</sup> Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (London: Vintage, 1995).

<sup>21</sup> Louise Fuller, *Irish Catholicism since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2002).

from various sources, offer their own lived testimony just as Lavin's emigration and Big House fictions do in relation to her family history. That allows for a reading of her work as truly suggestive of a post literary-revival realist mode. The variances of Irish society are played out on the pages of her stories.

Despite these recent studies, and excellent work by Declan Kiberd, Clair Wills and others, there still remains a need to augment our understanding of the 1950s in order to engage fully with fictions emerging from that time. Indeed, we have yet to see the full extent of the kind of fine-grained, nuanced, textured social and cultural history that would respond to the complexity of the world that Lavin wrote about, and lived in. That would shed light on the conditions of production for Lavin. This is particularly relevant because following her impressive output of collections, novels and individual stories from the 1940s, there are notably fewer new stories in collections during the 1950s. Yet those collections that are published can be seen to reflect this period not just in terms of how Lavin saw Ireland, but also as a chapter in her career where she takes stock. This is a stepping-stone to a new phase in her writing. From this point Lavin begins to address more fully the Lavin family narrative, acknowledging the part that emigration played in her future, coming to terms with the loss of her father by writing him explicitly into fiction. Although Lavin begins this process in the short story 'Say Could that Lad Be I?' (*Tales from Bective Bridge*), 'Tom' (1977) eventually makes explicit the impact of homecoming upon one who has spent some time outside of Ireland. The 1950s is also notable in that Lavin has fiction accepted by the *New Yorker*, the consequences of which are explored below.

### ***The New Yorker* magazine**

In the 1950s there is a noticeable shift away from the novelty and fearlessness of the 1940s fictions towards a more conservative approach. Lavin's particular version of realism may be almost too closely attuned to the silences and delicacies of the society that she depicts at this time, while her attempt at a more straightforwardly political style in 'The Patriot Son', for instance, did not convince readers. These shifts in style may also be explained by the relationship Lavin builds up with *The New Yorker* magazine.

In 1956 'My Vocation' had been published in *Atlantic Monthly*. Following a recommendation for Lavin from J. D. Salinger, Edith Oliver of *The New Yorker* had written to her expressing interest in her fiction, but declining any regular factual pieces that it appears Lavin herself may have suggested.<sup>22</sup> Lavin's proposal came in part from recommendations that Salinger makes; Salinger directly suggests to Lavin that she submit stories to *The New Yorker*. In his correspondence Salinger requests, 'Couldn't you think about it?' He points out the value of '[s]hort stories, reminiscence' and says:

They're terribly generous to contributors. And it's the only sane magazine to deal with in this country. Frank O'Connor and Maire [*sic*] Brennan do good things for the magazine. Please think about it. Nobody Irish has done any intimate, reflective pieces for them. Some things out of England, but nothing

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<sup>22</sup> Letter from Edith Oliver dated 27 November 1957, ML 628, box 23, fol. 7: Gotlieb Archive.

really Irish [*sic*]. I don't mean to push, but I think you and the magazine ought to have a Relationship [*sic*]. I hope you'll think about it.<sup>23</sup>

Maeve Brennan's successful letters in 'Talk of the Town' in that same publication over fifteen years may also have inspired Lavin to contribute something of a similar nature. Such a move would have been a significant departure for Lavin from her fiction, but it is not evident that such pieces were ever written. Brennan's letters were published later as a collection.<sup>24</sup> In her letter to Lavin, Oliver encouragingly writes:

[W]e can't encourage you to submit letters from Dublin on any sort of regular basis, but if you run across something that you feel would make our kind of report, we hope you'll query us about it.<sup>25</sup>

1958 brought publication of 'The Living' in *The New Yorker* and in 1959 publication of *Selected Stories*, notable for its preface in which, unusually, she briefly spoke of her writing technique and the reception of the short story.<sup>26</sup> Dunleavy points out that *Atlantic Monthly* and editions of *Harper's Bazaar* on both sides of the Atlantic had established inclusion of an Irish short story in most issues, and this provided a useful publication vehicle not just for Lavin, but for Maeve Brennan, Frank O'Connor, Sean O'Faolain and Liam O'Flaherty as well as a number of newer writers.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> J. D. Salinger letter dated 29 May 1957, fol. 13: James Joyce Library.

<sup>24</sup> Maeve Brennan, *The Long-Winded Lady: Notes from The New Yorker* (New York: William Morrow & Co Inc, 1969).

<sup>25</sup> Letter from Edith Oliver to Mary Lavin dated 27 November 1957, ML 628, box 23, fol. 7: Gotlieb Archive. Lavin has handwritten within this letter 'I cannot believe I even suggested this'.

<sup>26</sup> Mary Lavin, *Selected Stories* (New York The Macmillan Company, 1959), pp. v-viii.

<sup>27</sup> Janet Egleson Dunleavy, 'Mary Lavin, Elizabeth Bowen, and a New Generation: The Irish Short Story At Midcentury', *The Irish Short Story: A Critical History* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), pp. 145-168 (p. 145).

Towards the end of the decade, despite earlier protests that she felt the novel format was not for her, she writes in a letter to a publisher:

I cannot understand why *now* when of my own accord I have an urgent desire to start a novel, and an urgent conception of it in my mind, (which I was able to rough out for you), Mr. Joseph should require *ten thousand words*. [she adds] I have another new story nearly finished, but I want to work on the novel: not hawk away at it to the tune of ten thousand words, but begin, in my own fashion, to shape out portions of it [...] I don't want to write any more stories just now.<sup>28</sup>

This was just before *The New Yorker* accepted her story 'The Living'. She continues, 'In addition to the novel, I am anxious to do an autobiography called My Own Short Story [...] I was never so full of ideas, and the energy to execute them'.<sup>29</sup> No new novel emerged.

In *A History of the Irish Short Story*, Heather Ingman's discussion of editorial control in *The New Yorker* during the 1950s proposes:

[T]he Irish short story, with its characteristics of subdued realism and subtle irony, suited the New Yorker ethos [suggesting] at the very least, that the Irish short story was not at the cutting edge of literary experimentalism.<sup>30</sup>

She argues that *The New Yorker* was cautious, exhibiting 'blandness' during this decade: therefore to some extent in order to have work published, as *The New Yorker* was an 'important outlet for Irish writers', a certain distance from confrontational

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<sup>28</sup> Letter to Patience dated 18 March 1958, ML 628, box 23, fol. 2: Gotlieb Archive.

<sup>29</sup> Letter to Patience dated 18 March 1958, ML 628, box 23, fol. 2: Gotlieb Archive.

<sup>30</sup> Heather Ingman, *A History of the Irish Short Story* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 159.

issues had to be accepted.<sup>31</sup> Ben Yagoda goes a step further, highlighting that ‘the magazine was simply not receptive to brasher and potentially more disruptive voices’.<sup>32</sup> Yagoda argues that even new writers joining *The New Yorker* family in the 1950s and 1960s ‘did nothing to reverse the prevalent climate of gentility [...] The volume of their stories was subdued, the characters polite and well-bred, the ironies subtle’.<sup>33</sup> Maeve Brennan, Edna O’Brien, Brian Friel and Benedict Kiely are some of those Yagoda mentions alongside Lavin. Yagoda also points out that *The New Yorker* was extremely successful at this time, with increased circulation and advertising revenue under William Shawn’s editorial control, alongside a long-standing loyal reader demographic.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, there was no urgent impetus for change in *The New Yorker* house-style.

If writers were constrained artistically in order to get work published internationally, it could indeed be claimed that someone like Lavin would be subdued, prevented from completing work which, by her own words, is the ultimate manifestation of her thoughts. Writing in the preface to *Selected Stories* in 1959 Lavin states that she had dedicated herself so intently, ‘so singly to the art of fiction’, that she felt she ‘had maimed, and almost lost, the power to express [her]self in any other form’.<sup>35</sup> This would be the greatest silencing if editing restrictions damaged the sole voice of the writer. However, this reflection does not, with her own acknowledgement in this preface, include her letters, which are numerous and may well be regarded as a viable extension of the creative process. She often discusses

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<sup>31</sup> Ingman, *A History of the Irish Short Story*, pp. 159-161 (p. 191).

<sup>32</sup> Ben Yagoda, *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made* (New York; London: Scribner, 2000), p. 294.

<sup>33</sup> Yagoda, *About Town*, p. 294.

<sup>34</sup> Yagoda, *About Town*, pp. 309-311.

<sup>35</sup> Lavin, *Selected Stories*, p. vi.



her feelings about writing that is ongoing, or publishing concerns, with a certain naiveté and lack of restriction. Lavin had sixteen stories accepted by *The New Yorker*, and whilst she had to adapt to ensure publication of her work by the magazine, she had six collections, two novels and a children's book published by the time 'The Living' was accepted, with *Selected Stories* published a year later in 1959. Within this timeframe, before *The New Yorker* stories, Lavin's most remarkable stories emerge.

Yagoda discusses missed opportunities for *The New Yorker* under Harold Ross and William Shawn's leadership, but also makes the following stark appraisal surrounding contributions to the magazine with an Irish focus, either through the writer's associations or the subject matter:

[On Philip Roth's "Goodbye Columbus"] 'the story was exactly what the magazine should have been printing in 1957 [...] what was perhaps most important – it was about a world that had never really appeared in the magazine but was certainly of more interest and relevance to New Yorker readers than the inhabitants of 1920s Ireland or backwoods Alabama'.<sup>36</sup>

Yagoda's implied criticism about the relevance of fiction by writers such as Frank O'Connor, Mary Lavin and others, is awkward, as he has already drawn attention to Ross' intervention with O'Connor's 'The Idealist' (1949). Ross wanted more Irish dialect and an 'Irish-sounding name' included.<sup>37</sup> O'Connor's stories were published over a twenty-two year period, so there was obviously a market for Irish fiction. 1957 was one year before Lavin's first contribution to the magazine was accepted.

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<sup>36</sup> Yagoda, *About Town*, p. 297.

<sup>37</sup> Yagoda, *About Town*, p. 204.

Lavin's first published story in *The New Yorker* was 'The Living' (November, 1958), followed by 'Second-Hand' (April, 1959), 'The Great Wave' (June, 1959) and 'The Bridal Sheets' (October, 1959). Twelve more stories were accepted, nine of which were included in 1960s editions of *The New Yorker*, the final three in the 1970s. All those published between November 1958 and November 1960 were included in the collection *The Great Wave and other Stories* (1961), alongside 'The Mouse', 'Lemonade', 'What's Wrong with Aubretia?' and 'My Molly'. This symbiotic relationship between publication in the magazine and a subsequent collection is also evident in the following stories published between June 1961 and September 1965: 'In the Middle of the Fields', 'The Lucky Pair', 'Heart of Gold', 'The Cuckoo Spit' and 'One Summer' are all part of the collection *In the Middle of the Fields and Other Stories* (1967). The final four short stories also found a place in Lavin's later collections: 'Happiness' (December, 1968) is included in *Happiness and Other Stories* the following year, 'Trastavere' (December, 1971) in *A Memory and Other Stories* (1972), with 'Tom' (January, 1973) and 'Eterna' (March, 1976) in *The Shrine and Other Stories* (1977). Lavin's profile was undoubtedly raised by writing for *The New Yorker*, and this would have made publication of her own collections more appealing to Constable, Houghton Mifflin and Macmillan. However, although financially expedient, this was not necessarily seen as the best development of her oeuvre by some critics. Tom McIntyre's review of *In The Middle of the Fields* (1967) castigates *The New Yorker* for the impositions that it places on its contributors:

I see that well-heeled magazine as encouraging writers towards the stereotyped, the well-tailored, the urbane story which will grace a coffee-

table, and entertain madame – or her daughter – without great strain on their emotions. I don't think the magazine really encourages writers to experiment, to take risks with the material, to attack problems of form.<sup>38</sup>

McIntyre is disappointed with the majority of the stories in this collection which he found 'competent but not that exciting', sensing that Lavin had not stretched herself where a number of the stories were probably written to suit magazine restrictions, but the title story 'In The Middle of the Fields' is deemed 'a masterpiece'.<sup>39</sup> In fact, only 'The Mock Auction' was first published in this collection. In an addendum dated April 1975 to a collection of eleven manuscripts written by her first husband William Walsh, Lavin talks about 'The Mock Auction' in terms of a complex relationship between emotional need and creative ownership. It stands apart from the other *New Yorker* stories because of this. Lavin annotates Walsh's manuscript collection in the following manner:

Including Ms of story that I tried to rework as The Mock Auction & failed; the germ must develop within oneself I suppose. I was only trying to write it to 'continue' William a little bit, but it didn't. The corrections in my writing on his other stories were made during his lifetime. Three of these stories were published. The main item is an autobiography.<sup>40</sup>

McIntyre's comments regarding Lavin's success with 'The Mock Auction' in this collection are complicated by Lavin's personal agenda in working on this short story. They also lie alongside Heather Ingman's observations that *The New Yorker*

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<sup>38</sup> Tom McIntyre, 'Book Reviews', incomplete typed script, p. 1, Mary Lavin folders, private collection: Navan Library, Co. Meath, Ireland.

<sup>39</sup> McIntyre, 'Book reviews', p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> Addenda dated April 1975; eleven manuscripts by William Walsh, ML 628, box 22: Gotlieb Archive.

protocols for writers engendered a restrictive and eventually lacklustre atmosphere where testing the boundaries of the genre ‘was frowned upon’.<sup>41</sup> The irony surrounding Lavin’s writing for *The New Yorker* is that no matter what the constraints placed upon her, she had already gone through a lengthy and detailed revision process to hone each story. *The New Yorker* expectations for submissions that Ingman lists as ‘precision, detail and, above all, clarity’ are merits of Lavin’s fictions in their final published form, although Lavin would have had to tailor the fictions for the broader American market.

Despite this fruitful relationship, not all of Lavin’s submissions to *The New Yorker* were accepted. For example, a letter from the editorial office states:

I have sad news on “Villa Violetta”. I think it’s one of those stories we’re just the wrong place for, and I think (this is a subject I don’t really know anything about) that it might have a chance with a women’s magazine. The reasons it isn’t right for us are the softness (maybe you’re too happy; do you think that could be it? A joke.) It’s time we had a story from you as much as it’s time that you had us take one.<sup>42</sup>

However, this was not unusual in that contributors could be offered within their contract a ‘first-reading agreement’, as Gráinne Hurley points out; this offered a sense of security with an annual bonus but did not mean all work would be accepted.<sup>43</sup> Maev Kennedy recalls that Lavin ‘felt as grateful to *The New Yorker* in those early days as she was for the Guggenheim Fellowships which she was awarded

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<sup>41</sup> Ingman, *A History of the Irish Short Story*, p. 159.

<sup>42</sup> Letter from editorial office, *New Yorker*, dated 22 June 1970, signature page missing, ML 628, box 23, fol. 7: Gotlieb Archive.

<sup>43</sup> Gráinne Hurley, ‘Trying to get the words right: Mary Lavin and *The New Yorker*’, *Mary Lavin*, ed. by Elke D’hoker (Kildare: Irish Academic Press, 2013), pp. 81-99.

in 1959 and 1960, because they gave her enough financial security to risk everything on the short story, a perilous business'.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, Lavin's relationship with *The New Yorker* was to prove a sound move on her part in terms of international recognition, providing valuable publishing contacts and a new audience for her work.

It may be a terrible irony that the innovation and promise of Lavin's 1940s fictions may have been stalled by her later association with *The New Yorker*. That early period was undoubtedly where she is most fearless, albeit at times that the writing style is still being refined. After all, this is a new writer learning her craft. As Lavin consolidates her position within the writing community, and personal circumstances alter dramatically in the 1950s, her concerns about financial matters also drive certain decisions about publication. Lavin does continue to produce fascinating depictions of Irish communities throughout her career, and is never shy of challenging what she sees as misconceptions about Ireland and its people. Yet somehow the raw brilliance of the 1940s fictions is lost due to external pressures in the coming years. What impact does that suggest her relationship with *The New Yorker* has on her later writing? Lavin's position as a woman writer within a predominantly male environment cannot be ignored either. Why did it take over twenty years for her work to be critically recognised? Why subsequently has her work only sporadically been brought to the attention of emerging scholars and general readers? Compelling and difficult questions such as these remind us of the considerable aesthetic and cultural legacy of Lavin's body of work. We must continue to read and then deliberate upon her stories, to sustain that vital presence

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<sup>44</sup> Maeve Kennedy, 'The Saturday Interview', *Irish Times*, 13 March 1976, p. 4, press cuttings fol. 1: James Joyce Library.

within Irish literature. After all, Lavin declared herself an Irishwoman and chose to remain where others did not.

### **Private matters**

Lavin's personal life as ever made great demands on her professional life, and this was a difficult decade for her. Lavin's third child was born in 1953. Her husband William stood for election in the local area and became a Fine Gael Councillor in County Meath. He also stood for the Dáil in the 1954 [18<sup>th</sup> May] elections, but withdrew his candidacy weeks before due to ill health. On 2nd May 1954 he died.<sup>45</sup> Liam Cosgrave (later Taoiseach for Fine Gael) was his friend and family members have stated that William had acted as 'agent' for Cosgrave. Following his death, Mary was diagnosed with depression and spent some time in a psychiatric hospital, yet by 1956 *The Patriot Son and Other Stories* was published, closely followed by *A Likely Story* (1957).<sup>46</sup> That same year her mentor and friend Lord Dunsany died. This series of exceptional personal events had, as one might expect, a great impact on her. In a letter to the writer James Stern and his wife Tanya, Lavin reveals the great depth of her emotional loss:

I *cannot* write to you – or to anyone. I can only hold out a hand to keep our friendship close, & hope that some day [*sic*] I will again be able to derive pleasure from it, like from the flowers, & the subject & the facts of my children [*sic*] – to all of which I am still as dead as he is – William is I mean.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Leah Levenson, *The Four Seasons of Mary Lavin* (Dublin: Marino Books, 1998), p. 92.

<sup>46</sup> Levenson, *The Four Seasons*, p. 94.

<sup>47</sup> Letter dated 15 January 1955, Add. 80864 L1 80888 (ff): The British Library, London.

A similar mood of helplessness is evident in a letter sent after her father's death. She excuses herself to his former employers as unable even to correspond with those that mattered, that her father would have understood '[...] the weight of the sadness that overwhelmed me & [*sic*] kept my hands idle'.<sup>48</sup>

Yet once she recovered equilibrium she began writing again; in fact, read in hindsight her later Preface to *Selected Stories* appears to be more than mere introduction to a body of work. It reveals a great deal about the psychological impetus Lavin felt she had to work: 'Quite simply I must say that for me the writing of stories is a way of being'.<sup>49</sup> Writing fiction is of primary concern, as Maev Kennedy points out in the concluding section of her interview with Lavin in 1976: 'She has never wavered from the path she selected for herself – no plays, no criticism, no biographies or autobiographies'. She ends the piece with a quotation from Lavin: 'I never had time. There were too many stories'.<sup>50</sup> This makes the intent if not the resolution of Lavin's later correspondence with *The New Yorker* all the more noteworthy. This focus on fiction was reflected in the atmosphere that she surrounded herself with. After renovation work on her mews home in Lad Lane, Dublin, began in 1957 it is from here that a coterie of writers and artists at various stages in their careers developed and flourished under Lavin.<sup>51</sup> Young writers such as Nuala O'Faolain found a type of sanctuary there.<sup>52</sup> The limitations of writing as a widow with a young family seemed offset by the support and encouragement of a wide circle of friends and acquaintances.

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<sup>48</sup> Letter dated 25 October 1945, fol. 23: James Joyce Library.

<sup>49</sup> Lavin, *Selected Stories*, p. vi.

<sup>50</sup> Maev Kennedy, 'The Saturday Interview', *Irish Times*, 13 March 1976, p. 4, press cuttings fol. 1: James Joyce Library.

<sup>51</sup> Levenson, *The Four Seasons*, pp. 123-134.

<sup>52</sup> Nuala O'Faolain, *Are You Somebody? The Life and Times of Nuala O'Faolain* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1996), p. 61, pp. 77-78.

### **The 1950s: a decade of caution**

In his critical analysis of what he calls ‘The Middle Period’, Richard Peterson sees difficulties with Lavin’s stories from the 1950s. Peterson challenges the construction of the narratives as the primary driver, highlighting the following:

Her collections published in the 1950s [...] contain many stories that rely more on patterns of writing that impose the truth upon her characters and readers [...] Though well written, her patterned stories lack the fine balance of her early stories.<sup>53</sup>

Undoubtedly Lavin adopts a more conservative approach as her career progresses. Can Peterson’s objections be interpreted to suggest that a conventional approach creates conventional characters?

He is critical of the majority of *A Single Lady and Other Stories*, but does draw attention to ‘A Single Lady’, ‘The Convert’ and ‘A Tragedy’ as successfully creating ‘an impression of reality’.<sup>54</sup> However, Peterson also highlights what he calls the ‘patterned stories’ as falling short of Lavin’s more nuanced observations of the 1940s. Peterson questions the balance in this patterning, with laboured surprise endings and intrusive narrators, raising ‘Posy’, ‘The Small Bequest’ and ‘The Pastor of Six Mile Bush’ as examples. He appears to suggest that Lavin’s concentration on form and structure in this period hampers the writer’s relationship with the reader; that the scaffold around the plot and characters is too intrusive. Peterson’s criticisms have some value, although they cannot be said to be conclusive. ‘The Small Bequest’ in particular has moments where irony is surpassed by a powerful veracity

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<sup>53</sup> Richard Peterson, *Mary Lavin* (Boston: Twayne Publishing, 1996), p. 76.

<sup>54</sup> Peterson, *Mary Lavin*, p. 76.



and is deserving of closer reading without Peterson's preconceptions. Lavin's own estimation of some of these stories is worth noting at this point. In her letter to the publishers Michael Joseph, amongst her concerns about money Lavin does talk about two of the stories from the first 1950s collection. She writes:

Indeed I think their feeling that there was a certain contrivance about them [the new stories] is something I have often failed to eradicate from some of my stories like *Posy and The Gentle Soul &c.* [*sic*] But of the two stories in question it is the last word I would have used. *In a Cafe* was so little contrived I felt it was a formless piece of interior monologue.<sup>55</sup>

She said she was 'utterly dashed by their not liking the new stories' she had sent.<sup>56</sup> 'In a Café' was published by *The New Yorker* on 13 February 1960, and in *The Great Wave and Other Stories* (1961), but it is interesting to note this earlier rejection by Michael Joseph.

In her interview with Lavin in the 1970s, Maev Kennedy discusses Lavin's decision to concentrate on the short story format, drawing attention to Lavin's literary influences and her regrets about the novels she wrote, despite the valuable income that they generated. Lavin's personal copy of the published article is annotated in red pen: 'CW: you should have done this – I think you should file it with your cuttings: ML'.<sup>57</sup> It is a personal notation from mother to daughter. Read alongside the letter to her publisher, three things emerge. It is evident that Lavin was reappraising her commitments in the 1950s, conscious of managing control over the

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<sup>55</sup> Letter to Patience dated 18 March 1958, ML 628, box 23, fol. 2: Gotlieb Archive.

<sup>56</sup> Letter to Patience dated 18 March 1958, ML 628, box 23, fol. 2: Gotlieb Archive.

<sup>57</sup> Maev Kennedy, 'The Saturday Interview', *Irish Times*, 13 March 1976, p. 4, press cuttings fol. 1: James Joyce Library.

timescales and mode of work, even considering a departure from fiction. There is also a sense of weariness in this letter, echoing the mood of the decade. Finally, in that later annotation, Lavin was fiercely protective of how information is released from interviews. Management and control of material content was important to her. It should be noted that despite this enthusiasm for variety, Lavin did range from excited and enthusiastic to depressed and almost creatively immobile when issues of finance were involved. This was a constant source of concern and a topic for a great deal of her correspondence to publishers, editors and friends.

The 1950s fictions do contribute insightful observations on social dissatisfaction and, in light of the religious fervour shown by the public that Louise Fuller notes, interesting broader commentary on the culture of religion. The position of isolated protagonists in Lavin's fictions still embodies deep-rooted practices antithetical to change in Ireland at that time. For example, 'Posy', 'A Gentle Soul' and 'A Single Lady' from the 1951 collection make concrete the mood of hesitancy that Brown characterised from the period.<sup>58</sup> The narratives are underpinned by particular social tensions: these are the extraordinary authority of the Catholic Church on secular legislation, an ageing population unwilling or unable to provide adequate inheritances for their children, and the pressure of emigration. Enduring Church control over Irish congregations in the period arguably resulted in ambivalence towards marriage in these uncertain times: large families who still had members in Ireland now had a disproportionate number of bachelors and spinsters in them, each able to project the responsibility of marriage on to the other. 'Love among the Irish', Sean O'Faolain's tongue-in-cheek assessment of this thorny issue,

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<sup>58</sup> Mary Lavin, 'A Single Lady', *A Single Lady and Other Stories* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd, 1951). All further references are to this edition, and are given in the text.

expresses genuine concerns about the future for Ireland.<sup>59</sup> Ageing parents did not pass on their farms or businesses to their children (who themselves were often in their fifties and sixties), so delaying that generation's plans for marriage. Although Julia O'Faolain recalls it 'vastly amused' her friends at the time, O'Faolain's evaluation was in fact a calculated resistance to social deprivations and blinkered thinking.<sup>60</sup> This is played out in 'Assigh' (1959), a complex examination of 'the long imprisonment' that family guilt and connection can produce.<sup>61</sup> The patriarchal stranglehold over two adults is the framing device here, echoing some of the inheritance concerns played out in 'The Becker Wives' and *The Great Hunger* referenced earlier in Chapter 4. The 'dried and wasted years' identified in son Tom echo the barren future of Maguire in Kavanagh's poem. His sister, physically maimed by her father's anger, never marries (she is seen as damaged goods, unable fully to perform the duties of a farmer's wife) and so when the tyrannical father dies it would appear the line does too. Unbeknownst to the daughter, however, her brother had married in secret some seven or eight years prior to their father's death: this independence and narrative shift might suggest a way out of this impasse but as ever Lavin stalls the anticipation and undercuts any optimism. Tom and Flossie's decision to postpone having a family is futile as they cannot have children.

Lavin's fictions realise this stagnation, exploiting in her short stories a culture of secrecy in families. Daniel Doggett in 'Posy', Isabel from 'A Single Lady', Miss Emma Blodgett in 'The Small Bequest' and Rose Darker in 'A Gentle Soul' in particular are protagonists who exemplify an ageing population, who in some

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<sup>59</sup> Sean O'Faolain, 'Love among the Irish', *The Vanishing Irish: The Enigma of the Modern World*, ed. by John O'Brien (New York; Toronto; London: McGraw-Hill Book Company Inc, 1953), pp. 111-122.

<sup>60</sup> Julia O'Faolain, *Trespassers: A Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013), p. 144.

<sup>61</sup> Mary Lavin, 'Assigh', *Selected Stories* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959), p. 33. All further references are to this edition, and are given in the text.

instances are mistakenly expectant upon an inheritance for their survival. They are often emotionally naive or deceptively self-seeking. Each of these is deserving of close attention. However, 'The Small Bequest' and 'A Gentle Soul' are selected here as key texts representative of the 1950s.

Rose Darker is one of these emotionally inexperienced individuals. Her story is relayed as a first-person narration; when Lavin shifts from the dominant mode of third-person to first, that intimacy is always worthy of note. Rose is an older single woman living on a family farm with her sister Agatha. There appears to be an unresolved relationship between herself and a farm hand, Jamey Morrow, whom she has known since childhood. Rose does not respond to his advances other than to steal a few minutes' talk in private, or provide cups of tea when the days are cold. In fact, there is actually limited evidence in the narrative to support overt emotional connection between them. What there is the reader has filtered through Rose. Rose believes there is some invested meaning in how Jamey uses her Christian name when he tells her about friends of theirs who have run away to Australia; this information is possibly to provoke the idea of a romantic elopement. Yet even in the flush of excitement of hearing about the two friends, she differentiates between her Jamey the farm-hand and Andy Fagan, a labourer. Despite Rose's immaturity, a fundamental understanding of social order is evident in her.

Rose's notions of eventually realising a relationship with Jamey come to nothing. Jamie is tragically killed in an accident when driving one of the farm's mares in a cart. All of these events occur retrospectively in the narrative, and are relayed just after the burial of her sister Agatha. Rose has to testify at the inquest. It is then that her full betrayal of Jamey will take place. It is not only her defensive

responses to his potential courtship that have betrayed him but in order to protect the integrity of the family name and prevent a claim against them, Rose is coerced into an absence of truth by her father and sister. It is not a falsehood exactly, in that she fails to mention how kind and gentle he was with the animals and instead focuses on the kind nature of the mare. In this way it will appear that the accident was his fault and not the mare's. We do not explicitly hear the outcome of her testimony, but the references to her bitterness towards her sister and the frame of betrayal that she places around her own actions suggest she did as she was told. Her only act of rebellion was to force this absence of truth as she would not directly lie about Jamey. As Peterson points out, Rose denies her own nature due to external forces, those being familial and social, in an 'act of self-betrayal' which compounds the betrayal of Jamie.<sup>62</sup>

At strategic sites in the narrative there are glimpses of changes in Ireland. Rose contemplates these when reviewing the unexpected course of her family life:

Who, for instance, could have thought when this country got its freedom and they began to build ugly little concrete houses with hideous red-tiled roofs for the labourers and farm workers, that a day would come when they would be fitter for human habitation than our farmhouses that were such a source of pride to us. ('A Gentle Soul', p. 224)

There are references to thatches being replaced by slate, council properties being extended to more families, and labourers having expectations of becoming upwardly mobile, marrying the daughters of farmers. Could the unsightly aesthetic alterations that Rose highlights diminish a sense of local and national self-esteem linked to the

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<sup>62</sup> Peterson, *Mary Lavin*, p. 83.

very fabric of rural living? Rose and her father regret the alterations to the composition of the landscape. The rural economy that de Valera idealised appears to have lost its own structural integrity. The pace of the narrative shifts in that progress is densely introduced to suggest change comes quickly; recollections of Jamey and the past are more measured. Separation from traditional configurations of social ranking comes in the form of new housing and alternative lifestyles. The implication is that when farm hands and labourers can choose to leave a life of servitude it unbalances an established cultural inheritance, albeit an economically deprived one. Yet there was a need for change. As Francis Lyons points out, the rebuilding programmes and the launch of the Land Rehabilitation Project in 1949 answered a genuine call to improve welfare conditions in the rural and town locations.<sup>63</sup> In Brian Fallon's re-examination of the period he cites Garvin's observation that de Valera had actually changed focus to support a process of industrialisation in order to offer a more competitive Ireland.<sup>64</sup> 'A Gentle Soul' presents the case that a rural Irish identity encompassing the fabric of family, home and work is in danger of being lost.

Admittedly this focus is on the upper working-class or middle-class anxieties and pretensions. Rose herself recalls:

[W]e considered that the countryside was destroyed with these hideous little houses [...] Even I, who was glad the Morrows were getting away from the damp hovel in the fields where they lived [...] even I wished they weren't going to be right at the end of our lane. ('A Gentle Soul', p. 224)

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<sup>63</sup> F. S. L. Lyons, *Ireland Since the Famine* (London: Fontana Press, 1985), pp. 571-572.

<sup>64</sup> Brian Fallon, *An Age of Innocence: Irish Culture 1930-1960* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1999), p. 9.

The labourers and farm workers of Lavin's milieu would welcome the changes. However, a declarative such as 'even I' suggests immense frustration on the part of the middle-class about change that impacts too closely on them. This is felt even by the least rebellious of souls, Rose. Repeating concerns of the 1940s, Lavin intimates a hesitancy to move forward, just as in 'The Becker Wives' or 'At Sallygap', or illustrates the consequences of change as in 'Magenta' and 'The Joy-Ride'. Key protagonists value their existence *in situ* and this offers readers an insight into the ambivalent response to conditions in Ireland in the 1950s.

The most revealing agency of inertia from the period is the short story 'The Small Bequest'. It is one of a number of fictions that explore a sense of the decade as one of hesitancy, expressing doubt about the future. Here Miss Emma Blodgett can be read in terms of missed emotional connections and opportunities. She is also the victim of a cruel manipulation that wealthy benefactors can engender upon ageing dependents who fail to secure their affections. A development on from the familial control in 'A Single Lady', this relationship is not a new phenomenon in literature. The role of the ladies' companion, of Mistress and paid employee, ostensibly on equal terms, has often been used in women's writing to illustrate domestic tyranny. Here, Lavin's apparently objective narrator gives us an insight into the shocking cruelties inflicted on economically dependent single women in rural Ireland. Emma Blodgett fails to realise how her repeated over-familiar references to her employer of twenty-seven years, as Aunt Adeline, have distanced her from Miss Tate's affections over time. Miss Adeline Tate is a wealthy woman, who had often referred to Miss Blodgett as 'just like one of the family' and ironically often treated her as such ('The Small Bequest', p. 104). Yet evidently Miss Blodgett

is not, and status issues surrounding class and wealth dominate the narrative. At eighty years old, the wealthy Miss Tate is part of an established line:

[A]n old family, that went back for eleven recorded generations of plain but prosperous people, who had, however, linked themselves all along the way with the best stock in the country. The root was a plain and sturdy natural growth, but successful grafting had resulted in the frequent breaking out of blossom. The family had rarely failed in any decade to show a famous belle, a great soldier, or a poet. ('The Small Bequest', p. 106)

The narrator updates the pastoral metaphor introducing a scientific taxonomic slant and wryly observes that Miss Tate, as 'this charming old figurine', was evidently 'the result of careful selection and breeding' ('The Small Bequest', pp. 108-9). This comment contrasts vividly with the bloodline inheritance offered in 'The Becker Wives': there Flora (note the etymological connective) is the product of faulty alliances, is psychologically damaged and has entered into the Becker family under false pretences. The open-ended narrative of 'The Becker Wives' supports, but does not declare, the only option available to her husband Theobald and the rest of the family: Flora will be institutionalised and the family itself blighted by her speedy assimilation into the family. We presume therefore that Miss Tate's lineage is unblemished as careful selection has structured the family pedigree.

Miss Tate's companion, Miss Blodgett, is framed as an outsider. In her early sixties, she straddles an impossible line between the established family and the paid servants. She fails to recognise subtle indicators of wealth and supposed good taste that the narrator identifies, despite being in close proximity to these circumstances. The narrative uses a particular motif to highlight this. Miss Blodgett's gown is blue,



silky and of a similar pattern to Miss Tate's but, the narrator reminds us, does not rustle as she moves. In what must be one of the most revealing and almost sensual moments in a short story, the narrator observes the following when invited to tea:

[A]t the next moment Miss Tate delicately rustled across the room to me. And indeed, as my ear caught that rustle, which was as faint as a sigh, at the same time, in the far corner of the room where Hetty was pouring out tea, I caught another rustle that was fainter still. And if the rustle in Miss Tate's gown was like a sigh, the rustle that came from under Hetty's voluminous white apron was like the echo of a sigh. ('The Small Bequest', p. 111)

The maid Hetty's dress, darned and shabby, is one of her mistress's old gowns, handed on to her in a manner suggestive of long-standing, near-feudal intimacy between mistress and maid. This dress is a metaphor for a deep and ancient relationship between employer and staff: 'the genuine real thing' ('The Small Bequest', p. 111).

This contrasts with Miss Blodgett's shallow relationship with her employer, which is characterised by a more markedly modern exchange of money and is fundamentally lacking in traditional forms of sympathy. The limitations of this relationship are eloquently expressed via the new and silent silk dress. The narrative inscription of the absence of a sound (the rustle of material of quality), is characteristic of the subtlety of Lavin's writing as the narrator notes its inability to reach 'the genuine real thing [with its] slight creaking sound of the artificial silk fabric' ('The Small Bequest', p. 111). Emma Blodgett remains naively unaware that the well-intentioned imitation of her employer's dress falls well below the authenticity of the original. The visceral pleasure of connection through the repeated

articulation of ‘sigh’ connotes an emotional bond between Hetty and Miss Tate that Miss Blodgett quite obviously does not have. Hetty understands her position as an employee: she is loyal but not over-ambitious. She receives gifts and understands the practical and intrinsic value placed on them. A dress though is more than material covering: it offers an inherited connectivity, it suggests generosity and thoughtfulness by the donor, and reminds the recipient, in this case a servant, they may well be indebted to their employer.

The narrator observes of Miss Tate and her companion that they offered each other some parity in that Miss Tate provides a generous salary and a home for her assistant whilst Miss Blodgett devotes all of her time to Miss Tate, yet this apparent equitable balance is tested because of an underlying tension. This is finally revealed in an episode where Lavin provides the narrator with a series of imagined battle assaults, transposing the bite of a verbal arrow into fictional flight and thereafter references to Miss Blodgett’s refrain of ‘Aunt Adeline’ conjure up an archer’s offensive landing on Miss Blodgett’s ‘cameo brooch’ or ‘white pearl buttons’ (‘The Small Bequest’, pp. 117-118). The final standoff comes when a number of the Tate family visit and Adeline Tate reacts badly to this continued over-familiarity, stressing the Tate lineage and pointedly alienating Miss Blodgett from that family pedigree. As usual Miss Blodgett misses the barbed comments. It is some time later that the true extent of that alienation becomes clear; after her death, Miss Tate’s Will reveals a legacy of one thousand pounds to be paid to her ‘fond niece, Emma’ (‘The Small Bequest’, p. 136). There is no Emma in the family, and Miss Blodgett is now fully aware that she will not be a beneficiary. Yet Miss Blodgett still feels sympathy towards her employer, believing that the citation was out of love. The reader,

however, is made fully aware of that irony as evidence mounts to the contrary. Whilst Peterson's warnings about the contrived ending seem clear, Miss Blodgett's alienation from the family is deserving of more consideration than that of mere device. It strikes to the core of a human need to belong.

This generosity or naivety has echoes of the unfailing loyalty that Lally in 'The Will' demonstrates towards her mother, afraid for her soul as she dies before she forgives her youngest daughter for marrying against her wishes. Yet here there is something more: a suggestion that complacency has dampened the intellect and reduced awareness to protect the self financially and emotionally. Over-familiarity breeds passivity. The obvious anger that Miss Tate exhibits is a marker of intent prior to her demise. Despite their concerns for her well-being, Miss Tate's relatives continue to exclude Miss Blodgett from her legacy continuing that class distinction which might be easily remedied if they all contributed from their own inheritances, echoing the family discussions in 'The Will' to some extent. Ironically the deferential Hetty receives her legacy intact.

An interesting companion piece to 'The Small Bequest' is 'The Holy Terror' by Maeve Brennan.<sup>65</sup> First published in *The New Yorker* in 1950, it presents a different form of naivety and dependence, almost a stubborn stupidity, in the form of a greedy self-important individual who sees a guaranteed security in their employment. This security is gained through secret and underhand knowledge of business practices and a fear engendered in the rest of the staff at the hotel where she lives and works in Dublin. In direct contrast to Emma Blodgett, Mary Ramsey, the ladies'-room attendant, is a self-serving tyrant of a woman who has worked in The

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<sup>65</sup> Maeve Brennan, 'The Holy Terror', *The Rose Garden* (Washington D-C: Counterpoint Press, 2000). All references are to this edition, and are given in the text.

Royal Hotel for thirty-seven years, ten years longer than Emma's servitude with Miss Tate. Her working life has been dominated by the needs, as she sees them, of the hotel and its inhabitants, yet far from supporting those she meets, Mary dominates, intrudes and passes judgement whilst continuing her reign in the ladies' room.

Unlike Emma Blodgett, she has savings, her services to the hotel have allowed her to amass a great many gratuities and gifts and she lived and ate on the premises at the hotel's expense, where 'The ladies' room was her theater [*sic*] and her kingdom. She hated to miss a minute there. The power she had' ('The Holy Terror', p. 160). This self-awareness is something that Lavin never truly allows her protagonist, Emma, and, offers an intriguing alternative construction in victim status as Mary is destined to a similar fate as Emma - abandonment by those she feels would honour a debt of lifetime allegiance.

Unlike Emma Blodgett, who appeared to get on well with Miss Tate for many years (this despite a more recent undercurrent of unease felt by the narrator and the readers of the story), Mary Ramsey was feared by her co-workers and by the ladies who used the toilet facilities. The mirrors in the ladies' room were never clean, and Mary hardly presented herself as a professional cloakroom attendant with her broken and worn men's slippers and her trays of food, for she chose to eat and drink in the outer room there. The obvious distaste of the narrator for this woman affects the reader from the outset. Even the revelation that '[h]er dislike of the women she served possessed her completely' is no surprise following the blunt descriptions of her at the outset of the story; a certain menace surrounds the protagonist ('The Holy Terror', p. 161). The arrival of a new assistant manager, Miss Williams, signals great changes in the hotel and it is this outsider from Belfast who moves to oust

Mary from her realm. Belfast and Miss Williams are the foil to the locale of the capital city of Southern Ireland. If Mary is to be seen as a representative native incumbent then issues surrounding post-colonial power struggles would be easy to read into this tale, but for the present here she serves to function as the victim of an insidious betrayal that comes, to some extent, from complacency on her part. That is what connects ‘The Holy Terror’ so well to ‘The Small Bequest’ at this time of publication – apathy and betrayal. The story ends with Mary’s failure to interpret signs of deterioration in her presumed status and she receives her notice: this is revealed as a postscript in the final paragraph where ‘she realized she had no way of going back, and then it was too late’ (‘The Holy Terror’, p. 171). This concluding afterthought is almost an authorial revenge against Mary’s complacency.

Maeve Brennan’s relentless pursuit of complacency, envisaged through Mary Ramsey, is much harsher than Lavin’s construction of similar frames of mind. Lavin’s acute sensitivity is one of the key characteristics of her writing. Unpleasant characters and appalling deeds still engender sympathetic consideration. At the heart of each story lies a true understanding of what Lavin calls the ‘vagaries and contrarities’ of the human heart.<sup>66</sup> In his essay ‘The Human Heart’s Vagaries’, Robert Caswell states that ‘[T]he implications of [an] action for a character are important in his attempt to understand himself and those around him’.<sup>67</sup> Caswell responds to a particular criticism of her work, that is, that the form of the narrative governs the content. He argues that readers sometimes perceive that Lavin works on the results of actions upon fictional constructions rather than on the actions themselves. In spite of this criticism, he adds, ‘how often do significant actions

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<sup>66</sup> Lavin, Preface to *Selected Stories*, p. vii.

<sup>67</sup> Robert Caswell, ‘The Human Heart’s Vagaries’, *Kilkenny Review*, 12-13 (Spring 1965), 69-89 (p. 89).

occur to us in our own lives as compared with the insignificant actions through which we discover ourselves and others'.<sup>68</sup> This comment provides a genuine connection to the hypothesis of this research surrounding Lavin's work – that is, that the fictional collections depict an accurate illusion of real life, suggesting a critical awareness of private and social concerns internal to the narratives. The minutiae of existences serve to embed a sense of the genuine or self-conscious, and this is mediated through an artfully constructed literary form.

*The Patriot Son and Other Stories* is the second collection published in this decade.<sup>69</sup> It is evident here that a shift in emphasis, even an uncertainty in the construction of the collection itself, reflects the mood of the decade. Described by Peterson as one of the 'oddest mixtures in the Lavin canon', *The Patriot Son* is a complex blend of stories which address the family unit, religion, and the first instance of that rare event in the Lavin canon, a narrative of politics in the title story.<sup>70</sup> The plight of the individual is substance to whichever thematic is in play here. There is a particular concentration of narratives that connect with religion, for example, 'Chamois Gloves', 'Limbo', 'An Akoulina of the Irish Midlands' and 'My Vocation', an interesting decision in light of the socio-religious fervour that Fuller suggests was present. This also connects with Lavin's own introduction to Irish Catholicism as a monolithic belief system when she first arrives from America. In her interview with Quinn, Lavin rationalises the freedoms of her time in Walpole against more formal social expectations in Ireland, remarking: 'Leaving America and coming to live in Ireland had been a "culture shock" in many ways (even for a nine-

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<sup>68</sup> Caswell, 'The Human Heart's Vagaries', p. 89.

<sup>69</sup> Mary Lavin, *The Patriot Son and Other Stories* (London: Michael Joseph, 1956). All further references are to this edition, and are given in the text.

<sup>70</sup> Peterson, *Mary Lavin*, p. 86.

year-old) but particularly so with respect to religion and its practice'.<sup>71</sup> With this in mind, 'Chamois Gloves' best stands as a representative short story from the period, while also sitting well alongside Lavin's interest in overlapping values belonging to folklore and other-world experiences, for instance, religious acceptance of the presence of angels (and for that reason it was discussed in Chapter 2).

It is worth highlighting that not all Lavin's short stories that connect with religion are serious in tenor. 'My Vocation' allows the intimacy of a first-person narration to enlist empathy for its protagonist, and incorporates humour and a specifically adolescent perspective to reflect what was a common impulse in the younger Catholic community to enter into a religious vocation: poverty and incomplete education often the spur to consider entering a seminary or convent. In this case it is an abortive mission, as the expectations of a fun-loving teenager are wholly unrealistic. The attraction to a convent life is superficial, set around 'gorgeous-looking [nuns], with pale faces and not a rotten tooth in their heads. They were twice as good-looking as the Tiller Girls in the Gaiety'.<sup>72</sup> The narrative construction of a plain-speaking fearless teenager is unqualified genius: this everywoman figure articulates the prejudices, hopes and fears of all young women. Anxious to be taken seriously yet confident enough to renounce poverty and ill-health, she will go so far with the interview until luck intervenes to distance her from the nuns. She is charged with getting the nuns a cab, and in the process of trying to address all the instructions about respectability and safety she chooses most unwisely: the horse is flighty and the nuns are sent careering down the road after the cab breaks. The resulting chaos splinters her from that future, as she remarks 'in a

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<sup>71</sup> Quinn, *A Portrait of the Artist*, p. 89.

<sup>72</sup> Mary Lavin, 'My Vocation', *The Patriot Son*, p. 183.

way – if you can understand such a thing – I laughed away my vocation’ (‘My Vocation’, pp. 194-195). Lavin could be warning against the fiction of religious life in this almost farcical short story. Despite an undercurrent of serious frustration in the heart of the young narrator embodying the search for self-awareness and religious connection, Lavin undercuts this gravity with humour.

Those 1950s fictions that incorporate a religious theme do reflect small changes in public attitude towards the church, and a new-found confidence to question hitherto uncontested practices. Mary Kenny remarks that the ‘notion of personal privacy was beginning to take root, although “authority” was still honoured, and overruled privacy’.<sup>73</sup> That reveals a moment of significance, if not yet complete resolution. Lavin takes advantage of that mood in a story such as ‘The Pastor of Six Mile Bush’ (1951), exploiting particular assumptions about the clergy through the aggressive questioning of a young cleric by two medical students. They offer anecdotal evidence that a priest in a nearby village is both selfish and gluttonous, disregarding the needs of his parishioners; his housekeeper gossips that the priest eats huge quantities of food prepared by her every day. They bring the young priest to observe the older man’s failures; however, Lavin undercuts any secure sense of criticism as the men witness that the priest is generous, self-effacing and in fact feeding the local children secretly from his own resources, unbeknown to the servant. The older man is implicitly connected to the care of the community through the taxonomic reference in the title of the story; to suggest he abandons his parishioners contests the authority inherent within his position. An even greater challenge is that the narrative suggests early on that the younger priest is grateful that gluttony is the

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<sup>73</sup> Mary Kenny, ‘Love, Marriage and Family Values in the Irish 1950s’, *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1997), pp. 220-247 (p. 231).



least of the older man's sins. He thinks: 'Gluttony! It could be worse! If the others only knew what he dreaded to hear!'<sup>74</sup> Lavin does not elaborate on what other vices could have been revealed. Any suggestion of abuse, excessive drinking or sexual indiscretion, for instance, would have been far more confrontational in the narrative, and would be at odds with Lavin's careful management of key themes in this period. Whilst the narrative concludes in favour of the older man, throughout Lavin pushes beyond simplistic conjecture about the failings of the clergy, inscribing the mood of individualism that Kenny sees emerging at that time.

'The Pastor' looks forward to 'The Great Wave' (1961), where similar misconceptions about rank rather than the individual are scrutinized. The pomp and ceremony surrounding the visit of a Bishop to a small island community is at odds with the hardships experienced by those isolated from the mainland.<sup>75</sup> The Bishop returns by boat to the island of his birth for a Confirmation ceremony dressed in full regalia. He has a great love for fine things, for fine workmanship in tailoring especially, and has gone to a great deal of trouble over the years to purchase high quality vestments from abroad. This might appear a man most unsuited to the abstinence and humility of church office. However, as the narrative progresses we learn that the Bishop is one of only two survivors of a terrible storm that wiped out at least two generations on the island many years ago. His self-imposed penance is to return there every four years or so, despite his discomfort at being on the sea, to perform his religious duties. The tragedy of the Bishop's history outweighs his egocentricity. At its conclusion, Lavin has both highlighted the disparity between

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<sup>74</sup> Mary Lavin, 'The Pastor of Six Mile Bush', *A Single Lady and Other Stories* (London: Michael Joseph, 1951), p. 158.

<sup>75</sup> Mary Lavin, 'The Great Wave', *The Great Wave and Other Stories* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961).

church hierarchy and congregation, framing the ostentatious ceremonial robes against the practicalities of waterproof clothing of the islanders and ferryman, and engendered sympathy towards the Bishop as a young boy, Jimeen, who lost his mother and friends in a terrible storm. The only other survivor, his friend Seoineen, remains on the island, himself originally destined for the priesthood, but now broken by the terrible events of that day. The Bishop never meets his friend face to face again.

Drawing attention to weaknesses of character in these short stories is not merely unfair criticism or simple condemnation. It brings to light a more nuanced approach to close scrutiny of the Church and its incumbents. Lavin had been more openly critical of the supposed infallibility of the clergy in a much earlier narrative, ‘A Wet Day’ (1944), and it is worth considering such earlier fictions alongside later ones in order to map out Lavin’s treatment of key themes over time.<sup>76</sup> Lavin’s less sympathetic stance maps onto Margaret Mac Curtain’s observations that women writers ‘of previous generations [to the 1970s] critique the authoritarian patterns of family and social behaviour mediated by church teaching’, rather than looking back ‘to recall a lost innocence and to settle old scores with austere convent schools’, although it should be noted that the retained visible presence of these earlier writers is not a foregone conclusion as this research shows.<sup>77</sup> In ‘A Wet Day’, the imposing dress of the visiting priest does not impress the niece of the householder as it does the island community in ‘The Great Wave’. The niece is visiting an older aunt who is both generous and respectful towards the clergy. Lavin foregrounds the priest’s

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<sup>76</sup> Mary Lavin, ‘A Wet Day’, *The Long Ago and Other Stories* (London: Michael Joseph, 1944).

<sup>77</sup> Margaret Mac Curtain, ‘Recollections of Catholicism, 1906-1960’, *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women’s Writing and Traditions*, Volume 4 (New York: Cork University Press, 2002), pp. 570-571 (p. 570).

collar and tussore as prestige markers of authority, just as the Bishop's robes had been. Whilst traditional dress, the fawn-coloured silk is made from Indian silkworms and its association with the exotic appears out of place, especially juxtaposed against the sickly presence of the old parish priest. Lavin reverses the strategy of alienating the protagonist from the reader initially and engenders some sympathy for the old man as he is known to be diabetic and suffer from bad health. However, when he relates a story about his own niece and her fiancé who visit him, the true extent of his selfishness is revealed, and it is difficult to see how any redemption can be offered to him. It colours his future relationship with his parishioner. His niece's fiancé becomes very ill on the journey down, so ill that the question of whether they return immediately to seek medical assistance relies on assessing his ability to travel. By refusing to hand over a thermometer, although he possesses three, the priest contributes to the young man's death the following day, as he is brought back home when clearly he was ill with pneumonia and should have sought treatment locally. The priest does not wish his home or personal property to be contaminated by sickness or infection. In this story, Lavin is confident in condemning the uncharitable behaviour of the priest; judgement is easily made. Nevertheless, it is a remarkably brave thing to articulate in light of the climate of the 1940s.

'Sunday Brings Sunday' from the same collection is an even more scathing indictment against the Church.<sup>78</sup> The prophylactic properties of prayer are suggested as a better preventative against pre-marital sex and unwanted pregnancy than education and enlightenment. This ethos is channelled through the sermons given by a curate, with the implicit understanding that ignorance on sexual matters is proposed

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<sup>78</sup> Mary Lavin, 'Sunday Brings Sunday', *The Long Ago and Other Stories* (Michael Joseph Ltd, 1944).

as means to protect the young people of the parish. As the ensuing narrative reveals, this strategy is doomed to failure; young Mona's experience is to find herself pregnant by a local boy, Jimmy, despite her devout beliefs. In the closing paragraph, Mona sits alone in the chapel; enveloped by imagery of water, darkness and decay, like Shakespeare's Ophelia, she is subsumed by the ravages of despair. It is no accident that Lavin frames Mona's downfall as the victim of terrifying sermons delivered by a curate rather than a priest, within a building architecturally subordinate in stature to a church. Mona's new-found marginalisation is bound up with those church peripheries. Despite the shift from this type of outspoken criticism in the 1940s to more nuanced evaluation in the 1950s, Lavin's later stories still continue to have a remarkable impact upon the reader.

### **Narratives of family histories**

As Chapter 3 illustrates, there is a discrete group of stories that present fictional representations of Lavin's own childhood, and those of her parents', fashioned around their stories told to her. From the 1950s onwards, 'The Little Prince' (1956), 'Lemonade' (1961) and 'Tom' (1977) are especially closely bound to the shift from America to Ireland, with an earlier story 'Say Can that Lad Be I?' (1945) and the novella 'A Bevy of Aunts' (1985) paying tribute to both her parents' own early childhoods in Roscommon and Athenry. In her discussion with John Quinn, Lavin openly admits those narratives develop from an unashamedly semi-fictional exploration of her parents' return to Irish shores.<sup>79</sup> Lavin's working out of her family history through the fictions evolves slowly over the course of her career, with fictions incorporating emigration experience, as opposed to the Big House fictions,

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<sup>79</sup> Quinn, *A Portrait of the Artist*, p. 81.

only becoming discernibly personal from the late 1950s. This is not at odds with other writing of the period. In fact, James Ryan highlights the surprisingly limited representation of the emigration experience in fiction generally from the 1940s and 1950s even though the demographic shift from Ireland was significant. This makes ‘The Little Prince’ noteworthy by its inclusion in *The Patriot Son and Other Stories*.<sup>80</sup> Over time, Lavin’s exploration of the impact of emigration gradually moves from a broader social landscape to the personal: where ‘The Little Prince’ tells the more generic well-trodden and problematic account of the Irish traveller gone forever, ‘Lemonade’ and ‘Tom’ reflect upon more personal ramifications of the return to Ireland from America in light of Tom Lavin’s history. In these short stories Lavin moves cautiously, neither dismissing nor over-eulogising the enormity of enforced travel, but the shift towards a narrative of familial emigration is significant because it takes Lavin so long to write.

Ryan’s examination points, for instance, to struggles Mary Lavin had in recreating these mass relocations, but he does not include ‘The Little Prince’ in his assessment as his primary interest lies in the frustrations Lavin had with the overall theme. With that in mind, ‘The Little Prince’ falls into an abyss of emigration bereavement that we can deduce from Louise Ryan’s analysis of how we come to terms with goodbyes. ‘The Little Prince’ is excluded from James Ryan’s critical scrutiny in this instance. Louise Ryan reminds us that ‘[m]igration takes many forms – temporary and long-term, individual and familial, internal and external – and is

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<sup>80</sup>James Ryan, ‘Inadmissible Departures: Why Did the Emigrant Experience Feature so Infrequently in the Fiction of the Mid-Twentieth Century?’, *Ireland: The Lost Decade in the 1950s*, ed. by Dermot Keogh, Finbarr O’Shea and Carmel Quinlan (Cork: Mercier Press, 2004), pp. 221-32 (pp. 230-31).

often conceptualised in terms of permanent separation and loss'.<sup>81</sup> Any absences from the discourse surrounding emigration, particularly when examining a writer's approach to the theme, may not be easily recognised as contribution to the wider narrative. Nevertheless, absence as well as presence provides a marker of emotional and intellectual rationalisation of the event. The migration experience of individuals may be so traumatic that it might never be fully recorded; consequently, the impact is imagined by others rather than truly known. As Lavin's fictions span both private and public experience, any omission from the discussion is felt twice as deeply.

'The Little Prince', Lavin's generic construction of sibling division and migration, is one of a series of Grimes family stories. 'The Little Prince' explores concerns about enforced emigration, highlighting sacrifices made as strategies of survival. Sibling differences at a fundamentally emotional level, alongside underlying concerns about inheritance, force permanent separation across the Atlantic between brother and sister.<sup>82</sup> Bedelia, sister of Tom, is the primary worker in the family shop, and intends to marry Daniel, an employee there. As their father is nearing the end of his life, Bedelia resents Tom's *laissez-faire* attitude towards the family business and his over-generous nature towards 'idlers and spongers' who, as she puts it, 'knew they had only to rub you down with a few soft words, and they were sure to have their bellies filled with drink' ('The Little Prince', p. 203). She is concerned that her fiancé and herself will somehow lose out financially, and in a tense exchange, following her accusation that Tom is drinking (when he is not), she suggests her brother move to America, the 'obvious place [...] A new country, a fresh

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<sup>81</sup> Louise Ryan, "'A Decent Girl Well Worth Helping": Women, Migration and Unwanted Pregnancy', *Ireland Beyond Boundaries: Mapping Irish Studies in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. by Liam Harte and Yvonne Whelan (London; Dublin: Pluto Press, 2007), pp. 135-53 (p. 137).

<sup>82</sup> Mary Lavin, 'The Little Prince', *The Patriot Son and Other Stories* (London: Michael Joseph, 1956). All further references are to this edition, and are given in the text.

start' ('The Little Prince', p. 207). Tom leaves and never contacts them again.

Bedelia's justification for his exile is that he 'would not be the first black sheep to be sent across that ocean [...] Many a young man like him went out in disgrace to come home a different man altogether' ('The Little Prince', p. 199). Her explanation taps into emigration mythology that promotes countries like America as providing more opportunities for success than home. Taking into account Tom's character, Bedelia is not hopeful, but pursues a certain line of logic to protect her position. Later, two brief sightings of Tom by the daughter of a previous family servant suggest he is fine, although perhaps not in the highly paid position that Bedelia might have wished for her brother.

For nearly thirty years Daniel puts a share of the shop profits aside for Tom, but it is never claimed. When reports come that a man with Tom's name has been brought to hospital 'from a lodging-house in a poor quarter of the town', Bedelia and Daniel travel to Belfast to board the *SS Samaria* bound for Boston ('The Little Prince', p. 231). The bigger picture of sibling rivalry, loss and estrangement is what 'The Little Prince' is focused on, yet the emigrant passage is given some substance here, characterised briefly by poor weather, seasickness and a coffin in the hold. Although the body is that of an Englishman being repatriated to his adopted homeland of America, it is a conceit that resonates with famine history. The journey is fruitless, though, as Bedelia fails to recognise the body of her brother; he has died whilst she travelled. Although she attempts identification she thinks: 'if it was her brother, something had sundered them, something had severed the bonds of blood [...] if it was I who was lying there, she thought, he would not know me' ('The Little Prince', p. 251). What can be deduced as a form of emigration bereavement, as

Louise Ryan's work suggests, is realised through the inert physicality of the dead man in this short story, if indeed it is Tom. The complex emotional imbalance between Bedelia and Tom from the outset suggests this loss is manifested far earlier in the narrative, perhaps even before Tom leaves the family home.

'Lemonade' (1961) is a transitional text, in that it utilises Lavin's personal history in the first instance, but returns to the security of a generic experience of the reverse journey from America to Ireland in the latter part of the story. Notably, there are a number of gaps in the text, suggesting that Lavin is still hesitant about rationalising the personal with the public experience. Extrapolating from the conceptualisation of migration 'in terms of permanent separation and loss', this absence, or lack of experiential presence, in the fiction can be read as reflecting broader silences and losses surrounding relocation.<sup>83</sup> Lavin has spoken of unresolved tensions in the family about the move to America.<sup>84</sup> In 'Lemonade', the fictional Delaney family's history is relayed through an omniscient narrator, with the child Maudie at the centre of experience in both countries. At the traditional wake the night before travel, Lavin creates divisions amongst the emigrant population: the narrative alludes to class consciousness, to snobberies about steerage passage and remarks upon the power of one-way tickets. That simple purchase denotes finality in determining the location of home. Husband and wife are divided. The collective wistful investment of the crowd at the travel wake is at once a social occasion and an opportunity to restate national allegiances:

They were all Irish, but not born-Irish, and so taking part in this leave-taking of Dinny's wife and child had a two-fold nostalgia for them, a nostalgia for

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<sup>83</sup> Ryan, 'Women, Migration and Unwanted Pregnancy', p. 137.

<sup>84</sup> Quinn, *A Portrait of the Artist*, pp. 85-86.



the old country, but also for the old people, now dead and gone, through whose eyes, only, they had ever seen that lost land.<sup>85</sup>

This benchmark of collective nostalgia and emigration turmoil is still evident in modern Irish fiction, mapping onto more recent migration patterns, but often contextualising the journey within the security of the past, just as Lavin did. It is worthy of note that Fintan O'Toole highlights the continued reliance on America in modern Irish novels, in that 'so much that is interesting in contemporary Irish fiction is set in the US [...] The sense, then, is not just that a generation of Irish male novelists need the US but also that the US needs them'.<sup>86</sup> That elusive quality of homesickness and melancholy for a home as yet unknown, beyond a birth nation, is, for instance, recreated in Sebastian Barry's *On Canaan's Side*. There Lilly Bere remembers how she felt as she approached New Haven, USA for the first time:

[S]tanding on the deck [...] There was a scent, the scent of America, that came off the land, so suggestive, so subtle, there was something in it that claimed my heart. Even before we got there, I was experiencing a sort of nostalgia for the land, I do not know how other to describe it. As if I had been there before.<sup>87</sup>

Reading that passage it is as if the emotions of the wake community in 'Lemonade' are imbued in the single figure of Lilly. In both Lavin and Barry's fictions, published sixty years apart, there is a specific consciousness made familiar to

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<sup>85</sup> Mary Lavin, 'Lemonade', *The Great Wave and Other Stories* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962), p. 75. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>86</sup> Fintan O'Toole, 'Irish Writers Have Yet to Awake from the American Dream', *Irish Times*, 30 July 2011 <<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/weekend/2011/0730/1224301601689.html>> [accessed 30/7/11].

<sup>87</sup> Sebastian Barry, *On Canaan's Side* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), p. 58.

readers, pre-empting an imagined community of new travellers, or emigrants, to an old destination.

The divisions between the wake community become pronounced: as the wake continues, Dinny Delaney expands his storytelling about former passages across the Atlantic to reveal the chaos of when he travelled steerage, where ‘cups and saucers were chained to the tables – they were enamel cups, of course, or tin maybe’ (‘Lemonade’, p. 75). His wife is mortified by the public revelation that he travelled in the lowest class of passage. In an effort to distract the attentions of some of the women there who wish to examine the luggage labels on her own steamer trunks for evidence of similar transport, Mrs Delaney forces the labels towards them, defending the price of her passage. This attention to detail in the narrative is just right; Mrs Delaney’s abhorrence of steerage is well-placed. In a report from the *New York Times* in 1909 steerage conditions were deemed unsafe and unsanitary. Female agents for the Immigration Commission posing as passengers were themselves mistreated as well as witnessing abuse and manhandling by male personnel towards other women.<sup>88</sup> Newspapers had been documenting the appalling passenger conditions for years, and legislation passed in January 1909 was supposed to ensure adequate ventilation and hygiene standards, but older vessels at this time still did not comply. Lavin’s recreation of her parents’ journeys in the early twentieth century reflects recorded cases in the media from that time.

Lavin usually offers authentic depictions of the relentless drudgery of small-town living, rather than a diluted form of the Irish to outsiders. However, in

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<sup>88</sup> ‘Women in Steerage – Conditions called appalling’, *New York Times*, 14 December 1909 <<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=F60717FE385A12738DDDAD0994DA415B898CF1D3>> [accessed 5/8/11].

‘Lemonade’ and later ‘Tom’ there is a curious gap in that physical detail of the transatlantic journey. In light of Lavin’s openness about fictionalising her family history, it would be expected that some memories of her own voyage to Ireland might have been mapped onto her writing. Indeed, Lavin conscientiously specifies the names of the vessels on the journeys. Yet ‘Lemonade’, which clearly engages with a child’s experience of the return journey to Ireland, does not document the transatlantic shift in detail. Even in a radio interview Lavin occludes her own journey to Ireland, contracting the experience to seeing her father driving away from the *SS Winefriedian* in the docks, to one phrase: ‘travelling across the Atlantic Ocean brought home the vastness of the gulf between my father and me’.<sup>89</sup>

‘Lemonade’ is more about life before and after the long journey, with the motif of the sugary drink charting young Maudie’s experience of secrets; it is a ‘grown-up’ drink masking the reality of whiskey that numbs adult disappointment. It is also a treat for a child – even a dead one – at the expense of the living. This complicated interweaving of emotional pleasures and pain takes precedence in a story sidestepping the enormity of a journey that separates father from daughter for a time. Nevertheless, the journey took place. ‘Lemonade’ is especially moving once the narrative shifts from the events of the returned emigrant family to the more local focus on the death of a child, and the subsequent abandonment of another, as a result of a mother’s breakdown. The unadorned reality of the emigrant final destination is made apparent. When young Maudie Delaney visits the cottage belonging to Mad Mary Dawe and her daughter Sadie (Maudie’s new friend at school), it is less

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<sup>89</sup> Quinn, *A Portrait of the Artist*, p. 85.

welcoming than the other homes, and is a signifier of the loss and disadvantage of its inhabitants:

It was the same as the other cottages in a way, the same size with a window to either side of the door – two eyes and a mouth – only this cottage had such sad eyes, and such a hungry mouth, and all around it was so dirty and dismal. There was grass growing out of the rotting thatch, as well as in the crevice of the tumbling walls, while around the door were pools of water. ('Lemonade', p. 89)

The cottage also highlights the extent to which the local community has abandoned a grieving mother after the loss of her son, preferring to disregard her breakdown and subsequent lack of control, and in many ways to dismiss the obvious trauma that her surviving daughter faces without the attentions of her mother. Mary Dawe's energies go into looking after her son's grave in the old cemetery, where she had decorated his resting place with 'jam-pots filled with wallflowers, little plaster figures [...] broken pieces of marble statuary, a scroll, a little white cross and [...] a white angel with outspread wings', all items found abandoned in the old cemetery ('Lemonade', p. 99). Crucially, an unopened bottle of lemonade stands in the middle of the grave. Young Maudie and Sadie visit the cemetery one day and Sadie demonstrates great wisdom and protectiveness as she explains to Maudie about her mother's collapse following her son's death:

“I didn't want you to see it [...] She doesn't do it very often; it's a long time now since she did it at all. I thought she'd given it up, or forgotten, or something [...] I thought you'd laugh [...] I thought you'd be finished with me when you knew she was as queer as all that”. ('Lemonade', pp. 99-100)

Being children, the absurdity of the situation overrides the enormous emotional tension, and Maudie asks the obvious (but seemingly until then never uttered) question: ‘Does she think his ghost will come back and drink it?’ (‘Lemonade’, p. 100). Then temptation sets in and suddenly Maudie breaks open the bottle and holds it ‘up in the air so that both of them, pressed together, could catch with their eager open mouths the ineffable stream’ (‘Lemonade’, p. 100). Their united front is witnessed by Mad Mary but instead of triggering anger or upset, the image of the two girls, alive and having fun brings Mary back to her senses. It is an abrupt ending, but a joyful one. Any dislocation between a romanticised anticipation of a move to Ireland and the stark reality of actual arrival is recovered in this conclusion. It suggests a partial resolution in Lavin’s own playing out of family history.

A linked family narrative, classified as semi-fictional by Lavin in a radio interview, is ‘Tom’.<sup>90</sup> A first-person narration, and at that now established hinterland of autobiography in her oeuvre, it fictionalises Tom Lavin’s memories of his emigration to America but interestingly the strength of the story is not so much in a life lived abroad but in a return to Roscommon much later after Tom had been living in Ireland again. Lavin briefly echoes the folkloric strain of some earlier fictions, as in ‘A Fable’. This is played out through physical differences between members of the Frenchpark community and a notion of gifted success. Home figures are set apart by their obvious ageing, to the extent that they are unrecognisable to returning emigrants who are their contemporaries. Although in this instance the traveller has relocated to Ireland already, he is part of an earlier diaspora. The emigrant experience resonates with otherworld opportunities of youth, beauty and eternal

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<sup>90</sup> Quinn, *A Portrait of the Artist*, p. 81.

happiness, Ireland does not. Any expectation of easy recognition between former neighbours and classmates is distorted by a physical and intellectual gulf between those who travelled and those who remained at home. The community of travellers, embodied in Tom, appears to be sustained by some elixir of youth, strengthened by new opportunities: those left behind have a hard life, and age quickly. Tom is positioned as a heroic figure.

Lavin foregrounds the disparity between contemporaries by generically labelling some as ‘old-timer’ and ‘old woman’, intimating temporal distance between locals and those returning from America.<sup>91</sup> Such skewed perceptions of time tap into a key feature of folktales. However, Lavin merely glances in this direction, perhaps to bring to our attention the unrealistic expectations surrounding emigration: time stands still for those that leave, and disappointment sets in when they return to what is an idealised conception of homeland. This is marked in the narrator’s supposition that Tom’s ‘birth time would have stood still’ (‘Tom’, p. 51). The fine line between personally authenticated experience, and fiction that pays homage to lived experience, is clearly evident here in Lavin’s appropriation of family narrative. In the radio interview with John Quinn, Lavin actually uses two long excerpts from ‘Tom’ to illustrate her father’s story. Fiction becomes the authenticator of fact. In particular Lavin highlights the poverty Tom experienced, as: ‘[a]ll he took with him to America were the memories of the boy he had been’ and more significantly, ‘My father had made his memories mine’ (‘Tom’, p. 52).<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Mary Lavin, ‘Tom’, *The Shrine and Other Stories* (London: Constable, 1977), p. 67, p. 71. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>92</sup> Quinn, *A Portrait of the Artist*, p. 85.

Lavin's final phrase echoes the sense of inherited nostalgia in 'Lemonade'. Here in 'Tom' though, Nora Lavin's reminiscences are also lodged in the superficiality of the journey across the Atlantic with its shallow focus on entertainment and social status. Tom's earlier travels in steerage are upgraded, and the mother-figure has a state-room in cabin class. Games of quoits, reading on deck – all this reduces the impact of the journey, and is a far cry from the steerage conditions reported in the *New York Times*. In 'Tom' and 'The Little Prince', the traditional iconic emigration into New York is translated to an understated arrival in Boston, although in 'Tom' there is reference to the laboured journey from Roscommon to Dublin, then Liverpool, Scotland, Yorkshire and finally Boston ('Tom', p. 52). In 'Lemonade' the first sight of Ireland is merely reduced to a time-frame, 'four o'clock in the morning' ('Lemonade', p. 79). 'The Little Prince' has no statuesque vision of Lady Liberty, just the noise of 'sirens and screaming' ('The Little Prince', p. 239). Lavin's decision to fictionalise family life events leading to a journey, or to travel quickly from the dockside in her fiction to pursue a new stage in the narrative, reminds the reader of the artificiality of fiction: these are not just simple reiteration of the personal. By crossing from fiction into that hinterland of autobiography in order to engage with the potential difficulties of relocation, Lavin risks being dismissed as derivative or unimaginative. Neither is true. Lavin's affirmation of the artistic process makes that clear when she writes that 'there is artifice needed to reduce or raise a detail to the proportion proper for making it striking or appealing'.<sup>93</sup> The drive is to engage with a national narrative of shame: of enforced movement, of separation, of unemployment and poverty, to recognise private responses to terrible trauma and tragedy, to rationalise success and failure in

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<sup>93</sup> Lavin, *Selected Stories*, viii.

each person's life-story. The interdependence of autobiographical and socio-cultural experience and fictional depiction in Lavin's short stories reflects those complex issues.

The later novella 'A Bevy of Aunts' (1985) technically concludes Lavin's realization of the family accounts of their emigration.<sup>94</sup> However, whilst it fictionalises a young Mary Lavin's memories of her aunts in Ireland and briefly alludes to her parents' lives in Massachusetts, the value of 'A Bevy of Aunts' lies more in its weight as a discourse on family life within Ireland. Coming so late in Lavin's body of work, it is a summing up of her mother's history, where previously focus had veered towards her father's. It is worthy of a more extensive reading outside of this thesis, particularly in light of the resonances it shares with Kate O'Brien's family portrait *Presentation Parlour* (1963).<sup>95</sup> Re-situating this novella is not to detract from its significance; rather it is to remind the reader that there is a great deal more to be accomplished through re-readings of Lavin's fictions. For example, O'Brien manifests recollections of her aunts in physical terms: 'They created impressions. They made from five to forty-five different sorts of dents in the surface of family life'.<sup>96</sup> Lavin's family fictions similarly absorb and remake very particular memories of certain individuals, as my readings of those family fictions show.<sup>97</sup> A re-imagined family history is vital to Lavin's short stories. In Lavin's interview with Quinn, for example, the sentiments and personal details revealed there

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<sup>94</sup> Mary Lavin, 'A Bevy of Aunts', *A Family Likeness and Other Stories* (London: Constable, 1985).

<sup>95</sup> Kate O'Brien, *Presentation Parlour* [1963] (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1994).

<sup>96</sup> O'Brien, *Presentation Parlour*, p. 8.

<sup>97</sup> See Taura Napier's comments on how O'Brien demonstrates that her own life 'absorbed and reflected these lives [of her aunts] and their characteristics': Taura Napier, "'External Impressions of Life": The Paradoxical Autobiographies of Kate O'Brien', *Back to the Present, Forward to the Past: Irish Writing and History Since 1798*, Vol. 2, ed. by Patricia Lynch, Joachim Fischer and Brian Coates (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 27-39 (p. 37).



are echoed in ‘A Bevy of Aunts’. Giovanna Tallone’s recent study of Lavin includes this novella.<sup>98</sup> Tallone’s ongoing interest in Lavin’s fiction, alongside that of Julie Ann Stevens and Elke D’hoker, underscores the enormous value that persistent scholarship has in maintaining the presence of such a writer. ‘A Bevy of Aunts’ marks a key territory for future research on Lavin’s later fictions, both as an example of the wide range of her interests and as a study of her attraction to the novella form.

The limited proportion of narratives utilising the emigration journey in Lavin’s oeuvre is noteworthy in light of Lavin’s acknowledgement that family history played a significant role in particular fictions. Their gradual inclusion in the collections may well be due to conflicted emotions about where she belongs. One particular event undoubtedly shaped this tension. In the final stages of his life Tom Lavin asked his daughter Mary to keep her American citizenship:

When he was dying my father asked me to promise to keep my American citizenship, which he as a naturalised citizen, as was my mother, valued greatly. Until recent years I felt obliged to keep this promise until now in my 70<sup>th</sup> year I feel it is ridiculous, having spent 60 unbroken years in Ireland and all my forebears were & my children & grandchildren are all Irish, I wish to die and [*sic*] Irishwoman.<sup>99</sup>

The Oath of renunciation was made 2 July 1981 and approved 10 September 1981. It is pertinent to position more explicitly this empirical evidence at this juncture as it concludes focus on the emigration narratives. Although it took thirty-six years for Lavin to relinquish her promise, during that time she committed the greater focus in

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<sup>98</sup> Giovanna Tallone, ‘The Sound of Silence: Language and Speechlessness in Mary Lavin’s Stories’, Irish Short Story conference, Catholic University, Leuven, 2012.

<sup>99</sup> Declaration dated 17 August 1981, signed Mary Scott, fol. 4: James Joyce Library.

her work to Ireland and its people. This has contributed to one complication in categorising her: as an American/Irish woman writer, and finally a self-declared Irishwoman, the complete backdrop to her fictions has not been addressed in depth until now.

### Concluding remarks

In *Mary Lavin*, Richard Peterson's unease about obvious design in the fiction seems to suggest that forms of artistic compromise emerge even as Lavin consolidates her position as a writer.<sup>1</sup> Yet careful design is not necessarily inimical to 'fine balance', and acknowledging recurring thematic patterns in Lavin's writing is a fruitful means by which to understand the fictions more generally. Indeed, this thesis discovers established and emerging patterns in Lavin's life, family history and fictions. Lavin wrote of her developed interest in 'the music and architecture of words', suggesting a fluid creativity and innovative mode enhanced, rather than curtailed by, structures.<sup>2</sup> She clearly understands the fine line to be drawn between structural design and imaginative vision, while she is also capable of acknowledging that balance between technique and imagination might not be easily achieved. Lavin makes her particular understanding of structure clear in an interview when she points out that '[t]oo great an obsession with technique can probably be harmful to a story, as it is to any art form'.<sup>3</sup> What marks Lavin's writing is her curiosity in people, her search for authenticity in her representation of those she observes, and her interest in recreating Irish society itself as at once a fictional frame of reference and a complex culture that exists outside her stories.

It is worth reiterating that, by the 1950s, particular patterns of interest are established in the collections. Stories which prioritise grand themes such as the family, religion, secular regulation or blood lines and inheritance also investigate

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<sup>1</sup> Richard F. Peterson, *Mary Lavin* (Boston,: Twayne Publishers, 1978), p. 76.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Lavin in John Quinn, ed., *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 91.

<sup>3</sup> Catherine Murphy, 'Mary Lavin: An Interview', *Irish University Review*, 9:2 (Autumn 1979), 207-224 (p. 213).

such affective realms as childhood. In relation to their formative years, characters reconstruct their own childhood from the distance and perspective of an adult. Although reminiscences of their early lives may be fleeting, they reveal a great deal about life-choices an adult protagonist has made in the narrative, such as in ‘The Long Ago’ and ‘Brother Boniface’.

There are a number of short stories where the child is now a teenager or an adult (and so has moved on from being a total dependent) yet still adopts a position of reliance or allegiance in the company of a parent: ‘A Cup of Tea’ (1944), ‘Lilacs’ (1945), ‘The Dead Soldier’ (1945), ‘A Single Lady’ (1951) and ‘The Widow’s Son’ (1951) are worthy of note. Children also appear as essential contributors to a family narrative such as ‘A Happy Death’ (1946) and ‘The New Gardener’ (1969), but are not necessarily the primary focus – although they will have another function. In ‘A Happy Death’ for instance, the girls (one of eleven, two much older), are essentially mouthpieces of criticism formed by the behaviour of their parents. In ‘The New Gardener’, they are vulnerable presences in the story where Clem, a father of four, is prepared to protect his children by any means possible. We gradually realise that Clem has murdered his wife following an abusive incident with his youngest daughter. This thread of protectiveness runs through stories about childhood: occasionally it is an adult shielding a child, but more often it is children banding together against adults, or attempting to diffuse their own terrible arguments when they threaten to go too far. Then children go off to play, regrouping another day, much like the Duffys and the Dermody’s in ‘Tomb of an Ancestor’ (1972).<sup>4</sup> ‘The Bunch of Grape’ (1944) and ‘The Sandcastle’ (1947) also fall into this final category

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<sup>4</sup> Benedict Kiely, ‘The Greatness of Mary Lavin’, *Irish Times*, 21 October 1972, p. 10.

and might be more predictably what readers expect in terms of the experience of childhood - sibling rivalry, holidays, arguments between friends and making up. Yet even when Lavin shows us childhood as an early microcosm of adult negotiations, the world that she depicts remains highly particular and different to grown-up experiences.

The subject matter of widowhood can also be mapped from Lavin's own experiences onto the fictions, and recurs in a number of collections. Issues of loss and loneliness for women, realised fleetingly within 'Lilacs' (1942) and 'The Long Ago' (1944), are more deeply examined within the figure of Vera Trasko, a recurring character. It is worth noting that, despite its title, 'The Widow's Son' (1951) is better known for readings examining patterning and style in Lavin's body of work. The figure of the widow is best focused on in the following short stories: 'A Tragedy' (1956), 'In a Café' (1961), 'Bridal Sheets' (1961), 'In the Middle of the Fields' (1967), 'The Cuckoo Spit' (1967) and 'Happiness' (1969).<sup>5</sup> Lavin also explores the role of the widower in 'Heart of Gold' (1967), and the often forgotten figure of the son in 'Grief' (1944), but, perhaps for reasons to do with public interest in autobiography, it is to the figure of the widow that the greatest critical attention has been paid so far. It has not been the intention of this thesis to examine all of the rich subject matter present in Lavin's fictions: that task lies ahead in subsequent research. Nevertheless, foregrounding evident patterns of interest that intersect across the fictions offers an opportunity to reflect upon the complex narrative of Irish life that Lavin creates.

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Peterson highlights these fictions in his chapter 'The Later Fiction: The Widow Stories', *Mary Lavin*, pp. 100-142. See also Janet Egleson Dunleavy, 'The Making of Mary Lavin's "Happiness"', *Irish University Review*, 9:2 (Autumn 1979), 225-232.

As this thesis shows, Lavin's changing private and public roles over time, and various shifts in confidence, impact on her work: she is a writer who actively negotiated some form of fiscal security through her successful writing career, who was generous with her time and support for others but who balanced this with her roles as wife, mother and then widow, and these areas of responsibility became more and more an integral part of her fiction. However, that very focus on the domestic, outside of her fiction, may have kept her from becoming fully integrated into a longer-lasting and more consistent public position in the Irish literary canon. Prioritising family life, yet still driven to write, Lavin adopted and valued a private space early on in her career that was not yet publicly rationalised, fully owned and normalised by Irish feminists and social reformers of the 1970s and 1980s. Although Lavin made it clear that she did not see herself as a feminist writer, the focus of her fictions on power, family life and the domestic space means that her work should be of particular interest to critics and readers who are interested in the politics of gender. Yet, Lavin's fiction has only been sporadically addressed by gender critics since the 1960s. Despite a later wave of consciousness-raising literature and journalism by writers such as Ailbhe Smyth, Gerardine Meaney and Ann Owens Weekes, and in the face of the wider activism of Dale Spender and Elaine Showalter, attention to Lavin's fiction has been inconsistent.<sup>6</sup> Publication of volumes 4 and 5 of *The Field Day Anthology* in 2002 has gone some way towards addressing wider assumptions about what women writers had to offer, and indeed why retrieval work failed to consolidate their position in the canon. Yet despite inclusion in Volumes 2 and 4, Lavin still remains on the margin of interest, with peaks and troughs, rather than

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<sup>6</sup> Margaret Kelleher, "'The Field Day Anthology' and Irish Women's Literary Studies", *Irish Review*, 30:1 (Spring-Summer 2003), 82-94.

consistent linear interest, marking response to her work. A new collection of essays to mark the centenary of her birth entitled *Mary Lavin* (2013), edited by Elke D’hoker, seeks to redress those imbalances, adding new weight to the existing corpus of material on Lavin.<sup>7</sup>

This thesis brings vital empirical evidence to scholars interested in Lavin’s writing within these and other critical frames. It provides connection to the impact that a previous generation has had on Lavin’s short fiction. Based on extensive archival research, this thesis has argued for Lavin as a successful chronicler of twentieth-century Irish life. At the same time, it makes the case that the undoubted strength of Lavin’s fiction is in her commitment to the short story genre, which she made her own. The value of reappraising selected works, in particular family history narratives and those referencing the Big House, alongside Lavin’s interest in the novella form, is to provide a broader perspective to her writing, and to make clear the influences that impacted on Lavin’s short fiction.

The close readings given within the body of this thesis are driven by a complex yet empowering acknowledgement of the relationship between the writer and the reader. At the close of her preface to *Selected Stories* (1959) Lavin wrote the following on interpretation of fiction:

[T]he reader must be sensitive, alert and above all willing to come forward to take the story into his own mind and heart. Is it not partly his from the moment of conception? To whom does a story belong; to the writer or to the

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<sup>7</sup> Elke D’hoker, *Mary Lavin* (Kildare: Irish Academic Press, 2013).

reader for whom it was written? To whom does the echo belong; to the horn or to the valley?<sup>8</sup>

Lavin here suggests multiple ownership of a text. She questions the authority of either writer or reader to possess all rights, and relinquishes partial ownership to her readers, located across space and time. It is with that generosity of spirit in mind that I have offered my reappraisal of Lavin's short stories within their social, political and cultural context, to preserve the reverberations of her fiction.

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<sup>8</sup> Mary Lavin, *Selected Stories* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959), p. viii.



## Appendix

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