Eloísa Dall'Bello

PORTRAYALS OF WOMEN:
FEMALE AGENCY IN MARY LAVIN'S EARLY STORIES

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Orientadora: Profa. Dra. Beatriz Kopschitz Xavier Bastos

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Esta Dissertação foi julgada adequada para obtenção do Título de "Mestre" e aprovada em sua forma final pelo Programa de Pós-Graduação em Inglês: Estudos Linguísticos e Literários.

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Life has very little plot, I said. Life itself has the habit of breaking off in the middle.

Mary Lavin

ABSTRACT

The present study analyzes the female protagonists in "Sarah," "Lilacs," and "A Fable," short stories by Irish author Mary Lavin, which were published in her debut collection *Tales from Bective Bridge*, in 1943. By scrutinizing each protagonist in terms of personality traits, conflicts, relationships, professional activities, and engagement with social causes, my main point is to find out the extent to which a very strict, conservative and provincial social construction in mid-century Ireland might have impaired these women's emancipatory potentials. My hypothesis is that the protagonists, in spite of the constraining events that challenged women's agentic potentials, denoted a position of active mediation *vis-à-vis* such strongly rooted social *milieu*. As a means of better understanding if and how Lavin's characters had their freedom constrained, this study will offer a historical contextualization, referring to both society and politics in the Republic, and will discuss women's rights in Ireland in the first half of the twentieth-century. As regards the short story genre and Lavin's writing enterprise, an approach to modern Irish short fiction, and a brief overview of Mary Lavin's life and creative writing career, are developed. Concerning the theoretical background, the analysis is based on the concept of female agency, relying on Judith Butler's and Lois McNay's studies. I argue that, by not conforming to the male readership tradition in the Republic of Ireland, and by approaching themes often considered too feminine, inward-looking and domestic, Mary Lavin's stories challenged the ideal of Irish womanhood, which made her fiction much denser and sharper in critique than it has been recognized.

Keywords: Irish Short Story. Mary Lavin. Female Representation. Agency.

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89 pages

RESUMO EXPANDIDO

Introdução

O interesse em estudos irlandeses, internacionalmente, tem crescido consideravelmente desde a década de 1980, especialmente quando se trata de política e cultura. Demorou muito tempo para a disjunção da "harpa" (representando a Irlanda, a fêmea) e a "coroa" (representando a Inglaterra, o homem) para se tornar realidade com o Tratado Anglo-Irlandês e separação, em 1921, levando então a estabelecimento do *Irish Free State*, em 1922 (Pierce 1-7). Desde então, os estudiosos têm dado enfoque à tópicos como história, literatura, língua e cultura no contexto dos dois estados nos quais a ilha da Irlanda está agora dividida: a Irlanda do Norte, ainda parte do Reino Unido da Grã-Bretanha e da Irlanda do Norte, e a República da Irlanda, inicialmente chamada de Irish Free State e mais tarde a República da Irlanda, no sul. No entanto, há uma lacuna em relação ao papel das mulheres, como escritoras e personagens, na sociedade e nas obras literárias. Isso pode ser explicado pelo fato de que, durante séculos, as mulheres tiveram pouco ou nenhum direito perante a lei, e o cenário literário costumava ser notoriamente dominado pelos homens.

A Irlanda de meados do século XX, mais precisamente durante os de 1940, ainda apresentava-se como uma sociedade de mente provinciana e profundamente ligada à Igreja Católica, instituição que exercia grande influência não apenas em fatos cotidianos de cidadãos comuns, mas também mantinha relações diretas com líderes do governo – fato este que dificultou a vida de alguns grupos dentro da sociedade Irlandesa, como os não católicos e as mulheres, por exemplo. A influência da Igreja em questões práticas envolvendo o governo era notória, a qual foi explicitamente refletida na constituição de 1937, proposta pelo então primeiro-ministro Éamon de Valera.

Neste sentido, fazendo uso do importante contexto histórico acima explanado, este trabalho tem como objeto de estudo os contos “Sarah”, “Lilacs” e “A Fable”, da escritora Irlandesa Mary Lavin, os quais foram publicados em sua primeira coleção intitulada *Tales from Bective Bridge*, em 1943.

Objetivos

O objetivo geral desta dissertação é analisar a representação das mulheres e suas principais questões na Irlanda do século XX, através de uma análise comparativa das protagonistas dos contos "Sarah", "Lilacs" e "A Fable", os quais foram escritos e publicados por Mary Lavin no início de sua carreira. Os objetivos específicos da dissertação são:

• Identificar as principais características de cada protagonista em termos de personalidade, conflitos, relacionamentos, atividades profissionais e envolvimento com questões sociais.

• Comparar e contrastar os três protagonistas usando o conceito de agência para estabelecer se eles demonstram tal posicionamento nos ambientes em que estão inseridos.

A dissertação tem como objetivo responder as seguintes questões:

(1) Em termos de conflitos pessoais e sociais, quão diferentes são as protagonistas das histórias curtas de Mary Lavin "Sarah", "Lilacs" e "A Fable"?

(2) Considerando a força da crítica social de Mary Lavin na primeira fase de sua carreira, em que medida retrata as protagonistas femininas de forma semelhante, apesar de suas diversas posições sociais?

Por fim, minha hipótese é que essas protagonistas nos primeiros contos de Lavin são representadas como mulheres cujas atitudes representam uma posição de agência, apesar dos ambientes freqüentemente prejudiciais que eram usualmente encontrados na Irlanda do meio do século.

Metodologia

Esta dissertação parte de uma pesquisa bibliográfica, fazendo uso de elementos biográficos da autora, bem como de elementos históricos, e do conceito de "agência feminina" proposto na teoria feminista. Tais elementos são usados a fim de estabelecer um diálogo com os contos de

Lavin, mais especificamente no sentido de analisar a representação das protagonistas sob o viés acima mencionado.

Resultados e Discussão

A análise das protagonistas dos contos “Sarah”, “Lilacs e “A Fable”, sob o viés do conceito de agência, mostrou que independente do contexto no qual indivíduos estão inseridos uma possibilidade de agência é delineada. Tal comportamento autônomo e como ele é representado também depende de outros fatores em relação ao histórico do indivíduo, sendo questões como educação e posição social, dentre outros, fatores importantes a serem considerados ao analisar-se tal comportamento de agência.

Considerações Finais

Os três protagonistas, portanto, enfrentaram diferentes experiências de opressão, na medida em que suas relações com o mundo eram diferentes. As questões de Sarah, por exemplo, estava diretamente relacionadas à unidade familiar e aos códigos de moral e comportamento da sociedade. Kate, por outro lado, tinha graves problemas na unidade familiar, principalmente relacionados ao pai dela - que, por sua vez, personificava o raciocínio patriarcal da sociedade. Em "A Fable", a protagonista foi colocado em oposição à toda uma comunidade, tratada por Lavin como um personagem em si, representando, em sentido mais amplo, o pensamento provinciano da sociedade em relação às mulheres. Nestes termos, uma das minhas conclusões foi que não só Lavin estava consciente da medida em que as mulheres tinham seus potenciais de agência limitados, mas que ela buscou retratar em sua obra as diversas maneiras em que as mulheres poderiam deparar-se com situações que restringiam a possibilidade de agência – e mais importante: como elas poderiam superar tais obstáculos.

RESUMO

Este estudo analisa as protagonistas em “Sarah”, “Lilacs” e “A Fable”, contos escritos pela autora irlandesa Mary Lavin e publicados em sua primeira coleção, *Tales from Bective Bridge*, em 1943. Ao examinar cada protagonista, considerando características de personalidade, conflitos, relacionamentos, atividades profissionais e envolvimento com causas sociais, meu principal objetivo é descobrir até que ponto a construção social acentuadamente rígida, conservadora e provinciana na Irlanda do meio do século XX pode ter limitado os potenciais emancipatórios dessas mulheres. Minha hipótese é de que as protagonistas, apesar dos acontecimentos que colocaram à prova seus potenciais de agência, demonstraram uma posição de mediação ativa em relação à sociedade irlandesa da época. Para melhor entender se e como as personagens de Lavin tiveram sua liberdade limitada, este estudo oferecerá uma contextualização histórica, tanto em termos de sociedade como de política na República, bem como discutirá os direitos das mulheres na Irlanda na primeira metade do século XX. No que diz respeito ao gênero conto e à jornada de Lavin como escritora, o presente estudo abordará a prosa curta irlandesa moderna, bem como fará um apanhado geral da obra e da vida de Mary Lavin e de sua abordagem à escrita criativa. No que tange o aporte teórico, a análise será embasada no conceito de agência feminina, especialmente nos estudos de Judith Butler e Lois McNay. Ademais, argumentarei que, ao não agir em conformidade com a tradição masculina na República da Irlanda, e ao abordar temas frequentemente considerados muito femininos, internos e domésticos, as histórias de Mary Lavin desafiaram o ideal da feminilidade irlandesa, fazendo com que sua ficção se tornasse mais densa e contivesse uma crítica muito mais acentuada do que se tem reconhecido.

Palavras-chave: Conto Irlandês. Mary Lavin. Representação Feminina. Agência.

26963 palavras

89 páginas

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How I like that half-secret, half-muttered philosophy of yours, so sane and healthy, so indulgent, so broad-minded, so gently disillusioned and so imbued with the unavoidability of human destiny, as determined by human frailty.
Roger Chauviré[1]

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context of Investigation

The interest in Irish studies, internationally, has grown considerably since the 1980s, especially when it comes to politics and culture. It took a long time for the disjunction of the "harp" (representing Ireland, the female) and the "crown" (representing England, the male) to become a reality with the Anglo-Irish Treaty and partition, in 1921, and the establishment of the Irish Free State, in 1922 (Pierce 1-7). Since then, scholars have shed light on history, literature, language and culture in the context of the two states into which the island of Ireland is now split: Northern Ireland, still part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland, initially the Irish Free State and later the Republic of Ireland, in the south. Nevertheless, there has been a gap regarding women's role, as writers and characters, in society and in literary works. This could be explained by the fact that for centuries women had little or no rights and the literary scenario was notoriously dominated by men.

When World War II broke out in 1939, less than two decades had passed since Ireland's War of Independence, from 1919 to 1921, and the Civil War, from 1921 to 1923. At the outbreak of the war in Europe, Éamon de Valera's government declared Ireland's neutrality in the conflict. Although the majority of the population, and even the Irish government, hoped for a victory of the Allies, manifestations of any sort were forbidden so as not to influence people's opinions about neither side (Brown 160).

[1] Quotation from letter sent by professor Roger Chauviré to Mary Lavin, in 1945. Archive material available in University College Dublin – Special Collections.

The "Emergency" years, referring to the war period from 1939 to 1945, are regarded by many as a lost period in Irish history, for Ireland's isolation caused "economic depredations" (Brown 164) and decline, leading, for example, to fuel shortage, and food and energy rationing by the government. The country's posture of neutrality affected the reception of Irish writers' works in England, which was then a great consumer of literature produced in Ireland. The resistance of journals and publishing houses to welcoming Irish writing, together with the paper shortage, left Irish writers in "positions of desperate financial insecurity, for no writer could imagine making a living on Irish sales alone" (Brown 164). Some critics disagree, nonetheless, with the widespread "lost years" idea about the Emergency. Terence Brown himself counter argues that the isolation was by no means different from the one Ireland had been through before, in the years that preceded the war: "the entire period since independence, it must be remembered, had been characterized by an isolationism encouraged by official ideology and protected by censorship" (163).

As pointed out by Roy Foster, de Valera's vision of a rural Ireland, which almost neglected the more industrial cities such as Dublin and Cork, was part of an ideal of keeping the Irish peasant way of life. However, bare basic conditions of life, poor sanitation, and diseases such as tuberculosis were a reality in Ireland's rural towns. Such realities and the dissatisfaction with de Valera's policies led to the maintenance of the "emigrating population" reality, which would only change after the decrease of opportunity for emigrants in other countries together with the government's efforts to "counterweight the pull towards emigration" (Foster 538-540).

The period in which de Valera ruled is often regarded as strict and conservative. That might be related to his involvement with the Catholic Church and closeness to the leaders in that institution. This became clear when in 1937 the government published a new draft Constitution that "reaffirmed many Catholic beliefs and values" (Beaumont 574). Such influence was strongly felt by specific groups within Irish society, and brought preoccupation especially for non-Catholics and women (Lee 207).

In a male-dominated society in which even the constitution constrained women's roles and possibilities, it is not surprising that literature written by women would be relegated to second-level type of production within the Irish literary scenario. Due to this kind of dismissive attitude towards female writing, great works remained unknown to the general audience or unremarked for quite a long time.

Mary Lavin can be placed in this "category," since her works – as pointed out by Theresa Wray (237) – received "sustained" critical attention only after the 1960s. American-born but Irish-grown female writer (1912-1996), Lavin started her writing career amidst this transition context, depicting in her works a critical view of Irish society, dealing with questions that pervaded Irish people's lives in a period in which Ireland was struggling to construe its own identity. A harsh social critique is the key mark in Lavin's debut collection *Tales from Bective Bridge* (1943), from which the short stories to be analyzed in this study were selected. Although Mary Lavin is not very often studied as a feminist writer, scholars like Anne Fogarty (51) and Heather Ingman (229) have acknowledged Lavin's approach to women's experience in the mid-century provincial society that was Ireland before and during the so-called Emergency years. "Sarah," "Lilacs," and "A Fable," which compose the corpus of this thesis, bear witness to Lavin's endeavor in disclosing and exposing an extremely engrained societal construction through the relations of power and hierarchy which impacted people's lives at their deepest levels. In the aforementioned stories, the female protagonists, who give voice to a much broader portion of Irish society, function as a tool for Lavin's gendered and social critique of Irish society at the time.

Although Lavin gave up an academic career – at the time of her first story she was writing a PhD thesis on Virginia Woolf – when she wrote her first story, to pursue a creative writing career, it was financial need that led her to start publishing her stories in local magazines such as *The Dublin Magazine*, *Tomorrow* and *The Bell*. Like many short story writers, such as Sean O'Faolain and Liam O'Flaherty, she also published several stories in *The New Yorker*, which was then one of the greatest disseminators of Irish short fiction, in a period in which Irish writers suffered the sanctions for Ireland's isolationism and the censorship board. Even though short fiction was Lavin's chosen medium for artistic expression, having published an impressive number of eleven collections and six selections of short stories, from 1943 to 1985, she also published two novels – *The House at Clewe Street* (1945) and *Mary O'Grady* (1950) – which were not considered successful both by critics and Lavin herself.

Lavin's first short story collection, *Tales from Bective Bridge* (1943), serves as a key work in her *oeuvre*, for it deals with themes that would constantly be reworked in future collections (Wray 239). In addition, scholars like Maurice Harmon observe that Lavin's works from the 1940s and 1950s bear a stronger social critique, mainly due to the restrictive social and political conditions embedded in Irish society at the

time (12). Although relegated to a critical limbo of nearly two decades – considering that the first critical pieces on her work appeared only in the 1960s and her first collection was published in the 1940s – Lavin's artistry is acknowledged both by those who were in favor of her creative enterprise as well as by those who did not deal so sympathetically with her artistic approach. Frank O'Connor, for example, questioned Lavin's unwillingness to draw nationalist portrayals in her stories and demonstrated disapproval of her modernist techniques, but confessed: "She fascinates me more than any other of the Irish writers of my generation because more than any of them her work reveals the fact that she has not said all she has to say" (212). Besides having published a critical essay on Lavin's work, Roger Chauviré, in turn, offered personal support to, encouragement of and ideas on her writing journey, as is clear in one of the letters that he sent to Mary in December 1945: "Believe me, Mary, you can write, it is your vocation and it is your job: the creative spirit is there, you'll bear a lot of hefty spiritual children to your readers, and the more the better" (Archive material available in Special Collections – University College Dublin n.p.).

1.2 Significance of the Research, Objectives, and Research Questions

At PGI-UFSC, the Irish Studies field has been increasing considerably; nevertheless, there is not a single study on Mary Lavin's work and very few on Irish literature. In 1995, Eraldo de Aguiar Jr. defended his master's thesis entitled *A Study of Characterization and Representation in James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and John Barth's Lost in the Funhouse* and, in 2005, Ana Lúcia Bittencourt defended her work *Paralyses Revisited in the Light of Social, Political and Religious Aspects in James Joyce's "The Dead."* In 2016, Leide Daiane de Almeida Oliveira defended her master's thesis entitled *"I am of ireland": History and Politics in the Poetry of William Butler Yeats*. At the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, there has been also a master's thesis on Joyce, which was entitled *How to Build an Irish Artist: Joyce's First Portraits of Dublin*. At the University of São Paulo, several master theses and PhD dissertations have been written on Irish Studies – dealing with the works of George Bernard Shaw, W.B. Yeats, Elizabeth Bowen, Kate O'Brien, Sean O'Faolain, Frank O'Connor, Flann O'Brien, Anne Enright, John Millington Synge, Sean O'Casey, Denis Johnston, Brian Friel, Marina Carr, and Stewart Parker, among other Irish authors. In the Brazilian academia, even though some scholars have

published works on the Irish short story, Mary Lavin's work has never been explored as the central focus of theses or dissertations. Internationally, there are important works on Lavin's *oeuvre*, but none of them has approached the group of short stories chosen for this thesis specifically.

Mary Lavin is, thus, an author that requires more critical attention, and the value of her work still asks for dissemination. In order to have a deeper understanding of the "life of the kitchen," as Frank O'Connor (211) defined her themes, a study of her stories – the early ones in this thesis – is still needed. Differently from her male contemporaries, like O'Connor himself, Lavin's focus was not on the nationalist and political instances of Irish life, but on the family and community relationships and the impact of outer conditions on private lives. If the criticism of Lavin's thematic choices is justified for their supposed lack of political content, it may also be said to lack the ability to notice that she was from a different generation of writers, whose works were produced when Ireland had already passed through its worst troubles, such as the Anglo-Irish War and the Civil War. Besides, her American background allowed her to have a more realistic and critical view of Ireland in her fiction (Harmon 11).

In analyzing the representation of women in the short stories "Sarah," "Lilacs," and "A Fable," the present study places itself at the intersection of Irish and women's studies, thus contributing to both areas alike. Thus, the general objective of this thesis is to analyze the representation of women and their main concerns in twentieth-century Ireland, through a comparative examination of the female protagonists of Mary Lavin's short stories "Sarah," "Lilacs," and "A Fable," written and published at the beginning of her career. The specific objectives of the thesis are:

- To identify the major characteristics of each protagonist in terms of personality, conflicts, relationships, professional activities, and engagement with social issues.
- To compare and contrast the three protagonists using the concept of agency to establish whether they demonstrate such positioning in the environments in which they are inserted.

The thesis aims to answer the following questions:

(1) In terms of personal and social conflicts, how different are the female protagonists in Mary Lavin's short stories "Sarah," "Lilacs," and "A Fable"?

(2) Considering the strength of Mary Lavin's social critique in the first phase of her career, to what extent does she portray the female protagonists similarly, in spite of their diverse social positions?

Ultimately, my hypothesis is that these female protagonists in Lavin's early tales are represented as women whose attitudes depict a position of agency, in spite of the often impairing environments likely to be found in mid-century Ireland.

1.3 Women in Mid-Century Ireland

Women's and men's history and historical roles are often studied apart; moreover, great events in history, culture and politics are almost always related to the male figure, and women are rarely studied as being part of these processes. As a matter of fact, the female "place" in society has been well defined: domestic and family-centered (Kilfeather 99). Nonetheless, feminist theorists have argued that, in order to have a better understanding of women's place in history, it is substantially important to acknowledge the female role not only in the private/personal sphere but also in the public one (Scott 1057).

For some historians, the point is not to split women's and men's history, but to scrutinize them together, especially in Ireland, where the "wrongs" of women were strictly connected to the wrongs experienced by the Irish people (Kilfeather 98). The main issues faced by Irish women involved unequal access to education; domestic and sexual violence; limited rights concerning property and inheritance; and, not surprisingly, exclusion from all levels of government and the judiciary. These issues, however, varied depending on the region of the country, social position and demographic occupation (Kilfeather 97).

Many of the questions that women faced – even after having conquered equal franchise of rights, which came with the Irish Free State in 1922 – could be related to the influence of the Catholic ideology, and its association with the State, which subordinated women to a moralistic constitution that did not recognize their importance and value within society. Even feminist movements in Ireland were affected by ideologies – not only religious but also political. Militants used to meet according to their religious and political positions, in other words: Catholic republican groups and Protestant unionist ones (Kilfeather 103).

In spite of the advances regarding women's rights in the twentieth century, important improvements remained necessary concerning not only the public, but also the private sphere. As Mary Ryan has stated, "until the early 1970s, the family law statutes in Ireland were the same since the Victorian Period" (97), causing feminist activities to focus on the protection of women in family life, bringing about a new perception of public and legal matters. In 1937, De Valera's government proposed a new draft Constitution, which, in many articles, attempted to confine women's role solely to the private sphere – reaffirming many Catholic beliefs and values (Beaumont 574), and reiterating the view that women's most important roles in society were that of wife and mother. Several movements in Ireland publicly questioned authorities, attracting press attention, to the various ways in which the draft Constitution would threaten newly conquered rights such as the right to vote and citizenship qualification; rights already won in the Free State Constitution in 1922. The activity of these groups led to the amendment of some polemical articles, which was, at the time, a great achievement for women in a country still highly influenced by the Catholic ideology (Beaumont 576).

Considering that Mary Lavin started to write and publish her short stories during de Valera's government, more specifically in "The Emergency" period, the examination of the protagonists in the short stories "Sarah," Lilacs," and "A Fable" will focus on both private and public spheres, in order to find out in which contexts the protagonists have their agency constrained or reassured.

1.4 On the Concept of Agency

If one is to think about what agency is, words such as free will, choice, and autonomy might come to mind. However, the conceptualization of "agency" is dubious and requires a deeper understanding of how constructed social relations of power and hierarchies related to gender, class, and race interfere in one's response to "action and life trajectories" (*The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, McNay 42).

Although many people have the idea that agency is related to a position of resistance, it does not always need to be demonstrated as opposition, since one's mechanisms to deal with specific situations differ and need to be analyzed within the specific structure in which they take part. In its very beginning, the primary concern of feminism was to make gender inequalities public and also to shed light on "unnoticed" and

"undervalued" forms of women's agency, as put by Lois McNay (*The Oxford Handbook* 40-42). In addition, she explains: "The point of describing the world from the perspective of women's agency is to facilitate deeper understanding of the various ways in which gender inequalities are secured and to trace out possible pathways to empowerment" (49).

Similarly, Judith Butler approaches the theme through the "performativity" theory, and argues that the individual's recognition of his/her own gender is "done" through the embodiment of pre-constructed beliefs and everyday repetition, or the "performance" of determined acts. Social and historical aspects are prior to the self-recognition of a gendered form: "There are nuanced and individual ways of *doing* one's gender, but *that* one does it, and that one does it *in accord with* certain sanctions and proscriptions, is clearly not fully individual matter" (Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" 525).

Therefore, the concept of "agency" will be useful for a broader dimension of the protagonists' universe in Lavin's stories. Social and historical aspects will be crucial to the understanding of the protagonists' choices and reactions in specific conditions. My arguments will, thus, be aligned with contemporary kinds of women's studies, such as the ones carried out by McNay and Butler, dealing with the multiple circumstances in which women can have their agency constrained, because of gender, class, age, or religion.

1.5 *In Media Res*: Mary Lavin's Writing Journey

When Mary Lavin started publishing her short stories in 1943, the Republic of Ireland had already gone through the worst troubles, which were strongly related to the partition with Northern Ireland and then the independence from the United Kingdom. As a young woman who had not fully experienced the national troubles, Lavin's concerns as a writer were not as political as some of her male predecessors, such as Frank O'Connor and Sean O'Faolain, which led them to be extremely critical of her work. In the essay entitled "Heartfelt Narratives: Mary Lavin's Life and Work," Maurice Harmon explains that "her deeper subject was not social but psychological. Affairs of the heart, emotional struggle, and the complexity of the individual temperament were her primary concerns" (12).

A daughter of Irish immigrants who lived in the United States, Mary Lavin was born in Massachusetts and, at the age of twelve, in 1921,

she moved to Athenry, a rural town in County Galway, where her mother's family lived. Even being used to travelling to Ireland with her mother, the huge and permanent change was impactful, and she attributed her emergence as a writer to this experience:

> How great a shock it must have been to the eyes and ears of a child to leave that small town in Massachusetts and in a few days arrive in a small town in the west of Ireland. For all I know it was the shock to eye and ear that made me a writer. The kind of person who writes is born. I never wanted to be a writer, never, never, never. (Qtd. in Wolf 62)

As mentioned by Lavin herself, such change had a great impact in her life and would influence her work in terms of both theme and setting. Although Lavin's family did not live for a long time in Ireland's countryside – soon after coming from the United States they moved to Dublin – the memories from the period she lived with her maternal family would be a recurrent topic in her fiction. Many of the characters in her stories were inspired by real people from either her family or the town where she spent the first eight months of life in Ireland. Even her father, Tom Lavin, inspired a homonymous story, and critics have recognized in Vera – a character who appears in some stories later in her career – traits that remind the reader of Lavin herself.

Because of the importance of personal experience in Lavin's fiction, I will work with two biographical books written by Zack Bowen and Leah Levenson: *Mary Lavin* and *The Four Seasons of Mary Lavin*, respectively. I will also rely on Elke D'hoker's most recently edited book, *Mary Lavin*, which includes essays from social, historical and biographical perspectives regarding Lavin's journey.

1.6 "The Short Story Has Never Had a Hero[ine]"[2]: Female Protagonists in Lavin's Early Tales

I chose three short stories which, in my point of view, illustrate Lavin's willingness to portray the very reality of Irish people of her time, and which deal powerfully with diverse aspects of Irish society and issues

[2] Adapted quotation from Frank O'Connor's *The Lonely Voice*: "The short story has never had a hero" (18).

faced by women at the time. Lavin went through different phases as a writer, but it was at the very beginning of her career that she approached more fiercely women's questions: from family to social relations. The stories chosen for the corpus were published in her first collection *Tales from Bective Bridge* (1943).

Despite all the criticism regarding her choices as an author, for not representing an idealistic nationalism, Lavin succeeded at a time in which it was quite difficult for female authors to have recognition. It is even more remarkable that she wrote in a male-dominated genre, changing the focus from national issues to personal ones and, above all, putting women at the center of her work.

Sarah, whose name gives title to the first short story to be analyzed, has "a bit of a bad name" (Lavin, "Sarah" 37) in the small city in which she lives with her two brothers and three children conceived out of wedlock. In spite of her poor reputation among people in town, Sarah's difficulties lie greatly in the domestic sphere due to her brothers' destructive temperament and the influence of religion upon them. The main conflict in the story starts when Sarah gets pregnant for the fourth time, possibly from a married man, Oliver Kedrigan, for whom she has worked as a housekeeper. Her unwillingness to speak up about her pregnancy, and to reveal who the father of the child is, creates the tension between Sarah, her brothers, and ultimately Mrs. Kedrigan, who plays a big role in Sarah's tragic fate.

The protagonist of "Lilacs," Kate, is the older of two sisters who, after having finished their studies at a boarding school, returned to their parents' house in an unnamed city in Ireland's countryside. Kate strongly differs from her mother and sister in personality, and lives an endless conflict with her father due to his business with fertilizers, a lighter word used by the sisters to refer to dung. Among troublesome family relationships and unexpected events that changed the course of the story, the reader is surprised by Kate's active position in family and social affairs.

In "A Fable," Mary Lavin sets the tone of the story in the very first sentence: "She was the most beautiful woman they had ever seen and so they hated her" ("A Fable" 112). The protagonist – whose name remains unknown – is a newcomer in a village, who for many reasons other than her beauty is not accepted by the dwellers. In fact, all she represents is what those people's social norm and customs reject, as she does not fit in the pattern of women who are accepted in society: she lived by herself, threw parties that would last all night long, and had a lot of male friends

who would always visit her. Eventually, she is accepted by the villagers after an incident, which reinforces the idea that their problem with her was related to her unconformity within their social conventions.

Although Lavin does not provide information such as names of cities and the age of the protagonists, it is possible to infer through the context that the stories happen in small cities in Ireland, and that the protagonists are women in their twenties whose positions are put in perspective in contrast to those surrounding them.

1.7 Upcoming Chapters

Having established the context of investigation, as well as presented the general and specific objectives, research questions and hypothesis of this research, two subsequent chapters comprise the critical and theoretical approaches to be used as tools for the analysis of the female protagonists in Mary Lavin's "Sarah," "Lilacs," and "A Fable." The critical chapter draws attention to the history of the Irish short story, more specifically, the modern Irish short story. Then, there is a brief presentation of Lavin's biography towards a creative writing career – which is included so as to provide a deeper understanding of her motifs and writing style, as well as to explain why she opted for not to writing for the traditional male readership tradition in Ireland. The critical chapter also contains the topic "Women in Ireland in the First Half of the Twentieth Century," outlining a historical contextualization of women's issues particularly before and at the time of Éamon de Valera's government, especially in terms of women's rights (or the lack of them) and their fight for equality before the law regardless of gender. Finally, I approach the theoretical concept to be used in the analysis of the protagonists: agency. To do so, I make use of Lois McNay's and Judith Butler's writings on the topic, in order to have a broader view of what precisely is agency and how it can be possibly described by considering the uneven ways in which individuals realize it in the diverse social constructions in which they may happen to be inserted.

The analysis of the female protagonists in Lavin's "Sarah," "Lilacs," and "A Fable" proceeds from a dialogue between the critical and theoretical material and the literary texts. In order to find out whether these characters display a position of active mediation – agency – in the stories, I apply the concept of agency as used by McNay and Butler. Moreover, relying on critical pieces by scholars like Anne Fogarty, Elke D'hoker, Heather Ingman, Theresa Wray, Maurice Harmon and Roger

Chauviré, O'Connor's account of Lavin's work, I expect to resort to important instruments for countering ingrained and often uncomprehending arguments directed against her work. My analysis of the female protagonists also works on a comparative examination of the three of them, in order to achieve the objectives that I have established. To conclude, the final session comprises my specific and general conclusions of the study, and observations and considerations for future research both in the area of women's and Irish studies.

2 CRITICAL APPROACHES TO THE IRISH SHORT STORY AND WOMEN'S STUDIES

2.1 An approach to the Irish Short Story and Mary Lavin

Writers and critics of the short story have acknowledged the richness and value of the genre in Ireland. Elizabeth Bowen called it "the child of this century" (11) in a reference to the 1900s; Anthony Burgess recognized it as the form in which Irish writers excel (15). Frank O'Connor, short story writer and critic, highlighted that in Ireland "there has been no development comparable with the development of the short story" (206). The flourishing of Irish short fiction in twentieth-century Ireland owns part of its success to the country's tradition in storytelling, to the troubled historical conditions at the turn of the century, and, obviously, to the talent and geniality of its authors.

Stories themselves, in the most varied forms, have been around since the origin of humanity or "probably simultaneous with the birth of human consciousness," as put by Charles E. May in the book *"I am your brother": Short Story Studies* (31). Undoubtedly, modern short fiction holds sustained distinctions from its ancient relatives, and it would be reckless not to acknowledge the significance of oral storytelling tradition concerning the modern Irish short story.

Critics, however, seem not to have come to an agreement in relation to the date in which the first modern written short story appeared. Frank O'Connor, in the acclaimed book *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story*, asserts that the first modern short story was "The Overcoat," by Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, in 1840. On the other hand, May defends that short fiction with its "own unique characteristics" (18) was best represented by Edgar Allan Poe, also in the 1840s, who, besides writing short stories, also theorized about them.

When it comes to the beginning of the modern Irish short story, the issue of date is also a point of discussion among critics. Frank O'Connor singles out George Moore's *Untilled Field* (1903) as being the very first piece of Irish short fiction, whilst for Patrick Rafroidi (qtd. in May 9) *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.* (1899), by Somerville and Ross, established the starting point of the short story in Ireland.

Irish short fiction's bond with oral storytelling tradition must not be overlooked, although one must bear in mind that there are considerable differences between the old and new forms. The shift from oral to written mode implies a change in the audience, implicating the need for reshaping

techniques used from one medium to the other. In the essay "Storytelling: the Gaelic tradition," Declan Kiberd investigates the Gaelic inheritance and its significance both for the past and the present of Irish short fiction. As the first accounts date from the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, time in which the Irish Literary Revival was in its very beginning and a national consciousness was rising, many short story writers resorted to folk tales as a source of inspiration for their works.

Not only did the Gaelic tradition influence, in terms of theme and plot, the emergent Irish short story of the nineteenth century with its rich folklore, myths and tales, but it also constituted the bulk of several anthologies of Irish short fiction in the twentieth century. Translations and adaptations from folk tales by John Millington Synge, Augusta Gregory, and Gerald Griffin – just to mention a few – can be found in Vivian Mercier's *Great Irish Short Stories*, published in 1964 (Ingman 9).

Kiberd also highlights that whereas well-known authors of the period – like John Millington Synge and Lady Gregory – thrived mostly in poetry and drama, the short story was the chosen form of the "risen people, the O'Kellys, O'Flahertys, O'Faolains and O'Connors" (43-44), referring to writers such as Seumas O'Kelly, Liam O'Flaherty, Sean O'Faolain and Frank O'Connor, who came from the emerging Catholic bourgeoisie in Ireland's countryside.

Notwithstanding the undeniable contribution of oral storytelling to the modern short story in Ireland, Kiberd ponders that most of the modern short fiction in Ireland is "immune" to the usage of such references and that "the greatest short stories, in both Irish and English, owe more to the narrative genius of their authors than to the Gaelic tradition of storytelling" (48-50).

Similarly, Heather Ingman in *A Study of the Short Story* (2009) outlines the differences between the nineteenth-century short narrative and the modern form. For her, the main contrast was that nineteenth-century writers used their fiction not only to tell a story, but as a means of preserving the Irish peasant life, its beliefs and habits (16). Such efforts seem to have worked, for many critics attribute the greatness of the Irish short story as a unique art form to the impressive oral storytelling tradition in the country. Anthony Burgess, in the preface of *Modern Irish Short Stories* (1980), considers that despite the varieties of themes and styles that compose the anthology, authors seemed to share "an awareness of verbal tradition" (16). Likewise, Ingman asserts that "the oral culture may be, literally, another world but it is one that in Ireland shadows even the English language short story" (3). To be sure, Kiberd appraises the

influence of such tradition over the modern short story, but clearly illustrates what makes both the old and new forms distinct:

> The folk tale was impersonal, magical and recited to credulous audience in a public manner. The short story is personal, credible and written in private for the critical solitary reader. The folk storyteller could win the assent of his listeners to the most impossible of plots. The modern writer is confronted with an audience of lonely sceptics who insist on a literature which reflects their everyday lives. (47)

The modern Irish short story speaks for itself on the matter of producing successful and consistent literature without exploiting the country's cultural inheritance carelessly. Great authors, in both Irish and English, have written short fiction without necessarily relying on past practices (Kiberd 50), whereas others may have transposed in lesser or greater extent – and in various forms – such legacy into their works (D'hoker, "Complicating the Irish Short Story" 14).

The hybrid character of the short story in Ireland may lead to the discussions among critics in relation to the extent of the Gaelic tradition's influence upon modern works, but it is also the reason why it became the "uniquely national genre" (D'hoker, "Complicating the Irish Short Story" 3). The cause of such condition may be the country's hybrid identity that "resides in two worlds, the Gaelic and the Anglo-Irish" (Ingman 11), and the nature of its short fiction bears various dualities that enrich the literary production. For Ingman (6), the short story connections with other genres – such as fable, fairy and ghost stories, anecdote, sketch, tale and novella – bestowed to it hybridity as its essential characteristic. Accordingly, D'hoker asserts that the dualities present in the Irish short story – local versus foreign, political events versus private life, traditional versus experimental – are what "make its tradition hybrid, complex, and rich" ("Complicating the Irish Short Story" 15).

The outset of the twentieth century brought out the Revivalists nationalist agenda and an endeavor – by revisiting Ireland's folklore through literary pieces – to enhance people's identification with the country's cultural heritage. Nonetheless, it was also at this time that the emerging modern Irish short story started to be shaped by foreign influences; notably, the Russians Turgenev and Chekhov, and the French Flaubert and Maupassant. Some features of the modernist short story

defended and carried out by these writers were: conciseness, style, sentence rhythm, lack of authorial comment – Chekhov defended the author's objectivity and impartiality –, open-endings and the sense of unity created by the use of mood, feeling and tone rather than by plot itself (Ingman 84-86).

George Moore is considered the forerunner of modern short fiction in Ireland with the collection *The Untilled Field*, which comprised thirteen stories. Inspired by local and foreign influences in his writing style, he explored Irish rural life as well as the urban poor, bohemians and artists; his collection – although considered the first piece of modern short fiction in Ireland – still reverberated the oral storytelling tradition in some of its stories. Such incongruences, however, do not decharacterize his work as the turning point for modernist stylistics in Ireland, but it does show that the Irish short story was born "through a remarkable intertwining of the local and the foreign" (Ingman 88). Considering that Moore had been influenced by modernist writers during the years he lived in France, his work is a blend of the traditional storytelling style – noting that he was also a member of the Gaelic League – and new techniques learnt from Flaubert and Maupassant.

Yet, the real exemplary of purely experimental and modernist short story was James Joyce's *Dubliners*, published more than a decade after Moore's book, in 1914. Joyce, unlike Moore, presented an innovative work in which style, patterning and aesthetic unity displayed a disruption with the Gaelic storytelling tradition. Set in Dublin, the stories in Joyce's collection carry a symbolic unit: starting with stories about childhood, proceeding to adolescence, maturity and ultimately public life. In *Dubliners*, the reader is an essential part in meaning construction, for the use of modernist devices such as ellipses, hiatuses, silences, together with the use of suggestions and implications "obliges" the reader to have an active role in the construction of the story (Ingman 86-96).

The years of political unrest that followed the publication of *Dubliners* in 1914, notably with the War of Independence and the Civil War, affected directly the Irish literary circle and left their mark on the lives of writers in post-independence Ireland. In an era of social and political conservatism, censorship and economic instability, the publishing options for short story writers were scarce: they had either to fit into the local publishers' molds or count on international magazines and publishing houses. Sean O'Faolain, Liam O'Flaherty and Frank O'Connor – exponent short story writers in post-revolutionary Ireland – had their works published in magazines from the United Kingdom and

the United States, besides publishing in local ones such as *The Irish Tribune*, *The Irish Statesman* and the *Dublin Magazine* (Ingman 113-115).

The "intellectual poverty" (Lee 157), stimulated by the Censorship of Publication Act in 1929, reflected on the works of the period and portrayed the dissatisfaction of a society deeply immersed in a social and cultural depression – exhausted by the prolonged years of fight – in a country still struggling to consolidate its sense of nationhood. The Censorship Board had the power to bar any work considered indecent or obscene – in accordance with religious mores – and it ended up by impairing writers like Joyce, Sean O'Casey, Liam O'Flaherty and Thomas Clarke of fully disseminating their works (Lee 157-159). As put by Ingman, Irish short fiction from the 1920s and 1930s – pressed by the circumstances – depicted a "realistic awareness of the limitations of the Irish nation as embodied in the Irish state" (116).

The triad politics-society-literature troublesome relation would not be restricted to the early post-revolutionary period in Ireland; its complex interconnections were to continue influencing Irish writing in the subsequent years, notoriously during Eamon de Valera's government and strikingly in the Second World War period – known in Ireland as the "Emergency" years, topic discussed in the previous section of this thesis.

The short stories produced during these difficult years in Irish history did not follow the groundbreaking experimentalist style launched by Joyce in *Dubliners*. On the contrary, they still carried a transitional weight in terms of both theme and style, transiting between the romanticism of the Revivalist mode and the realist critique of the modern trend. Liam O'Flaherty, for instance, explored both the oral storytelling tradition and political issues, such as the War of Independence, in his *oeuvre*. Many of his stories seem to bring back reminiscences of his childhood in the Aran islands, for they deal with nature, animals and the peasant way of life. His later works, on the other hand, portray a more realistic and disenchanted view of the world that, according to Ingman, show his "disillusionment with peacetime Ireland" (130). The combination of oral and literary techniques and the diversity of themes approached by O'Flaherty mirror the "transitional state" of the Irish short story in the 1920s (Ingman 130).

Likewise, Frank O'Connor's early stories reflected his approximation with the oral tradition, focused on the community rather than on the individual, which for Ingman demonstrates an attempt to "recreate in the modern short story the human warmth and vigour of oral

storytelling" (132). Like Sean O'Faolain's and Liam O'Flaherty's, O'Connor's later stories presented an accentuated critical posture in relation to the outcomes of the Irish Free State politics on Irish society, for what was first romanticized turned – amongst these authors – into a common feeling of disillusionment. O'Connor, particularly, experienced a move from the "traditional communities" depicted in his early works to the "alienated individual," which shows that not only did these writers actively participate in these "transition years" of the Irish short story, but they also embodied it in their own works in a sense of thematic and stylistic change (Ingman 132-138).

Concerning the female contribution, important women writers from the 1930s, Norah Hoult and Olivia Manning gave to the female characters a more central role than had been given to them before by their male contemporaries. The realist mode was also exerted by both authors to portray their disenchanted and unromantic view of post-revolutionary Ireland, for both somehow had experienced the struggles of the War of Independence and the Civil War period. They also anticipated what would become a recurrent theme in women's writing in Ireland: the mother-daughter relationship. In turn, Elizabeth Bowen's stories that are set in Ireland approach a social critique with supernatural elements and deal with the situation of the Anglo-Irish after the War of Independence and the Civil War (Walshe 219-222). Later on in her career, Bowen wrote about the mood in Ireland during the Second World War, although she spent most of the war years in London. At the same time that she believed Ireland's neutrality to be positive for the country's sense of identity, she criticized Ireland for not knowing "whether to treat the war as a major threat or a minor inconvenience" (Ingman 153).

The Irish short story has always been, as restated by Ingman throughout *A History of the Irish Short Story*, bonded to the urgencies of Ireland's history. The unfavorable circumstances in the country as a consequence of the War of Independence (1919), the Civil War (1919-1921) and partition – resulting in the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, and Northern Ireland's continuing condition as part of the United Kingdom – set the tone of stories by authors who, in a way or another, considering that many had actively participated in the conflicts, experienced the struggles of a country which after its independence went through an inner battle to strengthen its identity.

Many critics consider the short story as Ireland's national genre. O'Connor himself forged the "submerged population group" (219) theory that – in his point of view – explicates why countries like Ireland and the

United States have produced so many short story writers and so few novelists, for instance. England, on the contrary, is regarded as "the homeland of the novel," with no impressive tradition on short fiction. For O'Connor, the difference is the "national attitude towards society," for the novel can deal with the concept of civilized society, thus it works better for more stable countries, whilst the short story "remains by its very nature remote from the community – romantic, individualistic, and intransigent" (21). Therefore, what made Ireland to be propitious to the short story form was precisely the country and its individuals' own nature. The "lonely voice" of O'Connor's famous book with this title refers not only to the short story writer himself, but to the reader who sees his life represented through the ups and downs of "tramps, artists, lonely idealists, dreamers, and spoiled priests" that are some of the likely ones to constitute the so-called "submerged population" (20-21).

Frank O'Connor, Sean O'Faolain and Elizabeth Bowen are some of the writers whose careers started in the 1920s and who continued publishing not only short stories but also critical pieces in the following decades. The generation of short story writers from the 1930s and 1940s "registered a social reality that flew in the face of nationalistic self-congratulation," as remarked by Terence Brown (146). Mary Lavin emerged as one of the promising names of this new generation. Differently from her contemporaries, Lavin's subject matter was not explicitly political or nationalist; instead she chose to "examine the wars of relationships rather than those of countries," as observed by Evelyn Conlon in the introduction to the 1996 edition of *Tales from Bective Bridge* (v) – Mary Lavin's first short story collection.

Lavin's career as a writer started almost by accident. She joined University College Dublin in 1930 as an undergraduate student and later continued to take her Masters' degree on the work of Jane Austen. Apparently, Lavin was satisfied with the chance of pursuing an academic career, for subsequently she progressed to her PhD studies on the work of Virginia Woolf, for whom she had declared great admiration. "Miss Holland," her first story, was written on the back of a thesis page; surprisingly, she kept on declaring she did not intend to become a writer – the general thought when she entered UCD was that she would do so – in spite of that first and casual impetus. In the introduction of *Tales from Bective Bridge,* Lavin explained why she disregarded the possibility of engaging on a creative writing career: "looking back I think it may have been vanity that held me back from attempting something at which I feared I might not succeed" (vi).

In 1939, "Miss Holland" was published in the *Dublin Magazine*, at the time edited by Seamus O'Sullivan. The publication provided Lavin more than just a stimulus to her career; it presented her work to Lord Dunsany – himself a fantasy fiction, science fiction, drama and poetry writer (Wray 140) – who would become her mentor, offering support and encouragement in the early phase of her writing career, and a dear friend to whom she would be always grateful. Lord Dunsany's genuine faith in Lavin's talent was of great help at the times she felt unmotivated and doubted her skills; he would warn her that "rejections were not going to change his opinion that the country had been blessed with a fresh talent" (Levenson 53).

Lord Dunsany's support to Lavin was not restricted to giving personal advice – for he thought she needed none in literature matters – or revising her writing, he would also promote Lavin's work, forwarding and recommending her stories to various editors, until she could have enough stories to publish her first collection. At a time in which literature in Ireland was suffering the consequences of the country's neutrality in the Second World War – many English magazines and publishing houses were not very welcoming of Irish works and paper shortage was a crude reality – such friendly and unpretentious help was crucial to strengthen Lavin's self-confidence, and for her not to give in to the unfavorable circumstances of the time (Levenson 53-55).

Tales from Bective Bridge, published in 1943, comprised ten short stories of which only four had appeared previously in magazines. In terms of thematic choices, Lavin's stories do not resemble much those of her contemporaries, mainly the male ones. Such distinction was notoriously acknowledged by Frank O'Connor in *The Lonely Voice*, where he pointed out that "an Irishman, reading the stories of Mary Lavin, is actually more at a loss than a foreigner would be. His not-so-distant political revolution, seen through her eyes, practically disappears from view" (203). Indeed, Lavin's approach was not as nationalist or as concerned with construing portraits of life at the Anglo-Irish and Civil wars as writers from the previous generation may had expected her to be. Instead, she adopted a critical view of Irish society from the beginning, proceeding from the inner lives and motifs rather than laying emphasis on the outer world. In an essay on *Tales from Bective Bridge*, Theresa Wray asserts that "Lavin's fictions strike at the foundations of religious, secular and social jurisdiction, resisting compliant acceptance of inauthentic constructions of national cohesion" (242). By focusing on the inner lives of Irish people and dealing with ordinary moments of everyday life, Lavin could reach a

level of awareness concerning the outer world's effect on daily life that would not be possible if she had not paid attention to the private.

Mary Lavin's critical perception of Irish society had a lot to do with her American background. Born in Massachusetts in 1912, daughter to Irish immigrants, she lived until the age of eight in the small East Walpole. Moving from a small town in the United States to the small Athenry, in County Galway, Ireland caused a great impact on her. Later on, she would recall her first impressions of life in Ireland as much more religious-centered and conservative than the one she knew in America. Although Lavin was very young when her family returned to Ireland, the memories of those first eight months living with her maternal family were to be a recurrent theme in Lavin's fiction. *Tales from Bective Bridge*, Lavin's debut collection, settles her interests in Irish lifestyle and landscapes. The title itself relates to a site in County Meath, where Lavin spent a great time of her youth. This would be the only collection in which the title was not taken from a key story. For Wray, it reinforces Lavin's personal relation with the stories and already establishes her vision of Irish life and the characteristic "focus on the personal, local and regional" (241).

The stories in this first collection already evidence Lavin's inclination to the modernist stylistics: the "slice-of-life" story with the tone giving it its unity rather than a well-defined plot. In "Discontinuities: *Tales from Bective Bridge* and the Modernist Short Story," Anne Fogarty outlines the key points of Lavin's inaugural collection arguing that her stories bear much of the experimentalism applied by authors like Joyce, Woolf and Chekhov (50-51). Lavin's fictions, however, shed light on aspects of Irishness that can be seen from a very particular place that is Bective, and dared to break up with the nationalist tradition that had been carried out by short story writers from the previous generation, attracting O'Connor's criticism for her "too exclusively feminine" point of view (*The Lonely Voice* 203).

On the other hand, scholars like Roger Chauviré – who was Lavin's French professor at University College Dublin – in 1945, and Augustine Martin, in 1963, presented a positive review of her early works. Chauviré acknowledges the distinct nature of Lavin's fiction and her born talent for storytelling: "there are many distinguished craftsmen of the pen whose work you will read and enjoy; but they will remind you of somebody or something else. Few have that flash of 'never before,' that novelty, that uniqueness. Mary Lavin was born with her own vision of the world, and her own way of conveying it" (qtd. in Wray 241). Similarly,

Martin highlights Lavin's otherwise position within the Irish short story canon – since the form of her short fiction resembles more those of Chekhov, Mansfield and Joyce rather than those of Moore, O'Connor and O'Faolain – and places her "outside the tradition" in the sense that her primary concern was not to tell a story, but to "mirror" life insofar as the human material provided in her short fiction can reach the readers' own experiences (394-396).

Likewise, in an account on Mary Lavin's life and work, Maurice Harmon points out the importance of Lavin's American background and brief period living in Ireland's countryside as essential points to understand her thematic choices and critical view of Irish society. Differently from authors like O'Connor and O'Faolain, who had personally lived through the struggles and ideologies of the wars in Ireland and, later on, had experienced the disappointment with the social outcomes of such conflicts, Lavin did not experience the "heady, idealistic nationalism" and was not "shaped by revolution," as they had been. To portray the figure of the "rebellious hero," so present in the stories of O'Connor and O'Faolain, was not her main concern. Instead, she chose to give voice to the "psychological dramas" as consequences of the constraining period in which she produced her stories (Harmon 11-12).

It would be, however, reckless to consider Lavin as an apolitical writer because of the methods chosen to depict Irish lives left voiceless for not being considered relevant to the social and political climate of the country. After all, how important was to talk about family issues when the country was going through a process to establish itself as a sovereign nation? Weren't the private lives exposed in Lavin's fiction also a crude exposition of Irish society's working mechanisms? As Theresa Wray has pointed out, "Lavin's fictions are in fact sensitively constructed to reflect her observations of twentieth-century Ireland and they respond to various external social moods" (250).

The stories in *Tales from Bective Bridge* serve as a key point to understand Lavin's *oeuvre*, for she would continue to revisit themes such as isolation, loss, dislocation and death, along with depictions of "Irish locations [that] provoke an unsettling dual sense of belonging and estrangement" (Wray 243). Dealing with social structures such as the Church and the State and their impact on family and community relationships, she depicted the lives of her characters with "extraordinary sympathy and empathy" (251). Throughout her first collection, one may perceive an intense awareness of class distinctions and the restrictive

norms of society under De Valera's government. As pointed out by Harmon, *Tales from Bective Bridge* as well as other works produced early in her career depict Lavin's experience as someone who lived in the years of the Second World War, a period of economic stagnation and social isolation, and the intrusive control imposed by the Catholic Church over the individual's life (12-13).

Although Lavin published her first collection in 1943, her works only received sustained critical attention in the 1960s. Given her position outside the canon of the Irish short story, her works remained rather unremarked for a long time. Recently, however, scholars have been rescuing important key themes in her *oeuvre*, such as the mother-daughter relationship, the role of women within Irish society, and the standardization of masculinity and its impact on men's lives. As Lavin's principal subject matter was people, and it is worth noting the value she gave to every human being in her stories – regardless of gender, class or age – they open up to a variety of readings, such as those presented in the previous section of this thesis.

Lavin exposed many of the problematic situations faced by women in Ireland, but she also talked about issues related to and pressures suffered by men in such stifling environment. Once, she declared that she did not write thinking of herself as a spokesperson of women or men, but as someone who was truly interested in people. As Lavin declared in an interview to Catherine Murphy in 1971, edited by Theresa Wray, an author needs to "love the people in the story, understand them and be interested in them, as much as you're interested in people in real life" (86). It is important to recognize her accomplishments as a writer whose sensibility and talent depicted Irish life in such subtle and touching ways, and that Lavin succeeded at a time in which it was quite difficult for female authors to gain recognition. It is even more remarkable that she wrote in a male-dominated genre, changing the focus from national idealism to private dramas, and brilliantly expressed the human dilemmas embedded deeply in mid-century Irish life.

2.2 Women in Ireland in the First Half of the Twentieth Century

The development of feminist thinking or even the acknowledgment of the condition of women within society would not become topics of discussion in Ireland until the early nineteenth century. Although it is known that women had been meeting in groups previously, there is no evidence that a "female franchise" was an issue on their agenda; they were

mainly involved in philanthropist activities, such as helping the poor, the sick, and the elderly – as observed by Siobhán Kilfeather in the essay "Irish Feminism" (98-99).

Public discussion about issues faced by Irish women became stronger around the 1820s, when, for instance, Anna Doyle publicly advocated for women's emancipation and rights, after leaving the country due to an unhappy marriage. Similarly, Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby became known as the first Irish lesbians to evade due to their sexual identity. Apparently, anyone, particularly any woman, who differed from the accepted societal behavior would chose to run away if she could (Kilfeather 100).

A crucial event that would later influence the evolution of feminism in the country was the Great Famine that struck Ireland in the 1840s, which turned explicit the fragile position of women within Irish societal system. The massive emigration by women at the time may have been a consequence of the famine, but many women who "contested the authority of the churches and the pervasiveness of restrictive family values in regulating sexuality, reproduction, dress, demeanour, education, employment and freedom of expression" left the country as a means of avoiding the conflict it would cause to stay and fight for a change, as marked by Kilfeather (99-100).

The aftermath of the famine and the acknowledgement of a need to improve women's living conditions in Ireland contributed to the awareness, in and out of Ireland, that Irish women were in a marginalized position and something needed to change. However, it was only in the beginning of the twentieth century that concrete signs of improvement would come out. In the 1916 Easter Rising, Irish republicans attempted to end British rule and establish a Free State. The 1916 proclamation of independence, read by Patrick Pearse, promoted the idea of equality to all Irish citizens, men or women, even if this proved to be an unfulfilled promise later on. A few years before, in 1914, the Irish Citizen Army – founded in 1913 for the protection of strikers against the police and led by James Connolly – accepted women as members: these women would later fight in the Easter Rising. Connolly, taken as one of the most important leaders of the insurrection, was one of the men who signed the Proclamation document and was credited as a great supporter of equal rights regardless of sex included in the document. It is worth noting that, by this time, questions such as the suffrage and women's emancipation were being discussed in newspapers, periodicals and literature, which leads to the conclusion that gender issues – brought about by several

feminist groups – were becoming an unquestionable national matter (Kilfeather 103).

The establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 guaranteed to women the equal franchise of rights, which was certainly a victory, considering that, for years, Ireland had been far behind other countries in Europe in terms of women's rights. However, it would not take long until new legislation would put into question the extent of equality regardless of sex. With the independence, the Catholic Church endeavored means to maintain its historical role and "sought an extended moral control in compensation for the loss of its historical role as the 'public voice of a wronged nation,'" as observed by Margaret O'Callaghan in "Introduction to Women and Politics in Independent Ireland: 1921–68" (125).

The Catholic Church used its religious homogeneity in the newly partitioned Free State to exert its ideological power on important instances of societal construction. The educational system, as pointed by Caitriona Beaumont in "Women, Citizenship and Catholicism in the Irish Free State, 1922-1948," was largely controlled by the Church. Catholic girls were taught not only moral principles, but also how an ideal Irish woman must behave, the places and activities she must avoid, and how to dress properly in order to prevent "indecent fashions" (566-567). In relation to health policies, abortion had been illegal in Ireland since the British 1867 Act and remained illegal in the Free State; the sale and import of contraceptives was to be prohibited in 1935. In 1929, the Censorship Publication Act banned any sort of information about abortion or contraception. Likewise, divorce had been outlawed since 1924 (O'Callaghan 129).

The cult of the Virgin Mary – and the ideal of motherhood, moral behavior and purity it represented – was seen as a role model that the "ideal" Irish woman must conform with. Considering that the excessive preoccupation with immorality was pretty much related to women's body and sexuality – and women already had their sexual behavior regulated – it is not surprising that many female citizens would feel displaced in such stifling environment. Likewise, the response to literature that dealt with or approached sexual matters was to be banned by the Censorship Board, and it would not change until the late twentieth century, as marked by Mary Ryan in "A Feminism of Their Own?: Irish Women's History and Contemporary Irish Women's Writing" (94). Sexuality and women's sexual rights were not subjects easily discussed, and many young girls would remain uneducated about their own bodies, once it was a difficult question to be dealt with in the family unit. O'Callaghan (125) highlights

that the idealistic view imposed on women – related to the cult of the Virgin Mary, virginity and purity – caused a feeling of inadequacy and inferiority on the ones who did not fit such model and did not want to be seen as "unsexed." Whilst privately women may have experienced guilt about their own sexuality, in the public domain this would "facilitate the legitimation of certain types of misogyny and contribute to the celebration of feminine self-sacrifice, subservience and silence" (O'Callaghan 125). Mary Ryan goes further and argues that "female desire presented a challenge to the concept of female morality and sexual purity" (94). There seems, thus, to have been an agreement among scholars in relation to the extent of the Church's influence on Free State policies. For Kilfeather, the influence of the Church on potential feminism in the Free State was "devastating:"

> Whether they were influencing the Censorship board to censor the work of Marie Stopes, the advocate of family planning, or even writings by Catholic obstetricians on the 'rhythm method' of contraception, influencing the League of Mary's attack on female prostitution and managing Magdalen asylums, forcing single mothers to give up their children for adoption, attacking dance halls and films as the site of foreign vices, or attempting to destroy the political careers of politicians believed to be sympathetic to socialism or divorce, the leaders of the Catholic church in Ireland repeatedly entwined discourses of racial purity, national pride and patriarchal authority. (106)

The great influence of Catholic ideology on Free State leaders had practical effects on national legislations. In 1932, Eamon De Valera assumed the position of the Irish Free State prime minister for a government that would be equally strict on women's rights and would adhere even more to the Catholic beliefs in its administration. Beaumont states that "there is no doubt that De Valera was a devout Catholic and conservative in his views on women" (571), besides keeping a close relationship with Church members. That sounds like the perfect environment for the Church's projects for the country, for "with no conception of the separation between Church and State the Catholic hierarchy assumed that the government of the Irish Free State, representing a predominantly Catholic populace, would uphold Catholic social teaching in all legislative decisions" (Beaumont 565).

Unsurprisingly, in 1937 De Valera's government published a new draft Constitution that "reaffirmed many Catholic beliefs and values" (Beaumont 574). For women, particularly, the draft Constitution threatened their position as equal citizens guaranteed in the 1922 Constitution. Comparing the texts of both Constitutions, one notices that changes in specific articles, which caused preoccupation and fear in relation to newly conquered rights, for instance, citizenship qualification and permission to vote – articles 9 and 16, respectively. Likewise, Article 41 also reiterated the Catholic view of women as mother and housewife when stating that the State recognized the work of women "within the home" and that women must not be "obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home" (574-575). Beaumont remarks that although the acknowledgment of women's work within the family unit was positive – for this had been one of the demands raised by women's organizations at the time – the government did not offer any condition that would improve women's work within the house or family support, such as provision of allowances or access to free health care.

As a result of women's outrage, groups like the National University Women Graduates' Association, the Joint Committee of Women Societies and Social Workers, and the Irish Women Workers' Union joined in a campaign to inquire the government and protest against the document that would legally confine women's citizenship merely to the functions of wife and mother (Beaumont 563-575). In general terms, women's organizations fought in order to ensure that the Constitution was clear in terms of equality regardless of gender, a point that was quite obscure in various passages showing that the 1937 draft was "the clearest affirmation of women's domestic duty" (Beaumont 574).

The government denied that the 1937 draft Constitution offered any sort of risk for women's rights, but women's organizations were not convinced and continued to question several clauses of the document that would legally confine women to the role of wife and mother. Ultimately, a few Articles were amended, including those that raised more discussion: 9 and 16. For Beaumont (576), by obtaining these amendments, women obtained a great achievement in The Irish Free State. Although the draft Constitution remained, in many ways, highly pernicious for women's citizenship, women's achievements must not be overlooked, for their strength in claiming for equality of rights at a time in which many Irish women remained unaware of their own marginalized position inspired

women in the following years to continue pressing the government for changes in women's situation by the law.

During the 1940s, women's organizations continued campaigning for the recognition of women as equal citizens within Irish society. One of their major points was that the state acknowledged women as important members of society not only in the domestic and private spheres, but also in the public ones. The movements did not deny women's role within the family, on the contrary, they also kept fighting for better conditions for women's work in the home and for them "to be acknowledged as responsible citizens." With the outbreak of the Second World War, food rationing and a rise in prices, women's associations – notably the Irish Housewives Association – attempted to defend women's rights as consumers and to guarantee that all citizens would have equal access to essential supplies (Beaumont 578).

The subsequent years to the approval of the draft Constitution on June 1937 would witness women's movements still fighting, in general terms, for the same cause: women were not secondary or inferior citizens and wanted their rights legally guaranteed, be within the family unit or in the public sphere. These movements had an important role in the fight against constraining and unfair clauses proposed in the new Constitution, as well as in the following years of constant campaign against the marginalization of women. For Beaumont (579-580), Irish women's movements provided new possibilities and offered a positive ideal for women in Ireland.

2.3 The Concept of Agency

The fields of Women Studies and Feminist Studies are vast ones. This thesis does not aim to cover the whole history of these research areas, but to focus specifically on one aspect of these huge fields, in order to proceed with the analysis of the short stories by Mary Lavin which constitute its corpus: female agency. For such, texts by two theoreticians on the concept of agency will be explored: Lois McNay's and Judith Butler's.

Feminist studies in general have not sought to discuss only the instances in which women have their freedom constrained due to social constructions that place them in a marginalized position. One must say that the major feminist concern – at least with the third wave of feminism and onwards – is to shed light on how women have always contributed to

society and to find possible ways of overcoming ideological impairments that are deeply enrooted in societal norms.

In feminist theory, the concept of "agency" has been discussed and reshaped by theorists that see it as an important characteristic for individuals to find a way out of the stifling regulatory rules imposed by social constructions. Although one may relate "agency" with words such as free will, choice and autonomy, it is necessary to bear in mind that how such potentiality is realized and how its significance can vary according to the cultural context in which individuals are inserted, as remakerd by Lois McNay in the essay "Agency" (39-40). In addition, she argues that some individuals or groups may manifest more agency than others, and that the analysis of agency "denotes a cluster of actions considered to be categorically distinct from the types of unreflective, habitual, and instinctual behaviors which are held to be quasi-automatic responses to external structural forces" (40). McNay opposes to the idea of portraying agency merely as an attitude of objection or denial in face of a difficult situation or hostile environment, for people have different manners of assimilating, reacting, and their interpretations of possible constraining events is not straightforward. Thus, agency does not necessarily need to be performed strictly in an oppositional manner.

Judith Butler deals with the concept of agency through "performativity" theory, in which she argues that the individual's recognition of her/his own gender is done through the embodiment of pre-constructed beliefs and everyday repetition, or the "performance" of determined acts. The fact that the gendered self is expected to act in a certain way, in accordance with social prescriptions, turns itself as a means of subverting such norms if one ceases to correspond to such expectations in her/his gender performance. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler defines agency as "the potential interruption and reversal of regulatory regimes" (XXVI) in a sense that the necessity of repeating and reiterating gender norms shows its fragility and reinforces its relation with culturally established stereotypes, inasmuch as "those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" 522).

Butler's "performativity" theory leads to an account of agency as resistance that goes beyond the prior understanding of the concept in the spectrums of voluntarism – that has to do with the understanding of agency as the quality of the "sovereign actor," an autonomous and "fully rational" individual who is able to overcome constraining events in quite a heroic mode – and determinism, that sees agency merely as a response

to an external condition. Hence, resistance can be seen as "empowered agency" for it does not need to represent an "outright rejection of oppressive norms (522)." Instead, it works through the subject awareness of such repressive mechanisms, generating a "displacement from within (522)."

In a likely manner, McNay recognizes that the view of agency related to resistance is helpful to perceive the various forms in which individuals can have their emancipatory potentials constrained and how constructed social relations of power and hierarchies related to gender, class, and race interfere in one's response to external events:

> Resistance moves feminism beyond the adjudicative mode of some of its formulations of agency as autonomy toward more open-ended and experimental forms of politicized ethics. Freedom is not about stipulating the way individuals "ought" to live but rather encouraging them to interrogate the limits of what appears to be natural and inevitable in present forms of identity and attempting to go beyond them. ("Agency" 45)

Intrinsic to the understanding of agency as resistance is the acknowledgement of social and historical factors that lead individuals to act and perform their gender roles in certain ways, for they are prior to the self-recognition of a gendered form. Just as a disruptive response also depends on such conceptions inasmuch as "the ability to act is always mediated by the dominant norms and relations of power that shape any situation" (McNay, "Agency" 41), agency needs to be thought within a historical context and to consider the uneven manners individuals realize it.

Correspondingly, Butler discusses the body as a historical situation and gender as a construction, an embodiment of different possibilities that constitute a gendered self. In this sense, she argues that one is not born a woman, but becomes a woman to the extent that she embodies possibilities that are at the same time conditioned and circumscribed by historical conventions ("Performative Acts" 541). Butler observes that "there are nuanced and individual ways of *doing* one's gender, but *that* one does it, and that one does it *in accord with* certain sanctions and proscriptions, is clearly not fully individual matter" ("Performative Acts" 525).

Recognizing that there are conventions that must be followed to perform gender, and that the performance of gendered actions is correlated to already existing determinants, Butler notes that the possibility of agency lies on the individual's "capacity of reflexive mediation" through stylized acts, and considering that gender is manifested through the repetition of performative acts, agency can be "located within the possibility of variation on that repetition" (*Gender Trouble* 185). In a likely manner, McNay's understanding of agency as resistance corroborates the idea that it "rebuts political prescription and endorses a processual notion of emancipation as a particular way of inhabiting social structures to create oppositional spaces and 'pathways' to empowerment" ("Agency" 45).

Both Butler and McNay recognize that, in general terms, if women are systematically subordinated, a possible consequence is that their emancipatory abilities end up being compromised. Therefore, the importance of analyzing individuals' agentic capacities and the possibility of actually depicting a position of agency is bound to the specific relations of power within that specific social construction. The point of not misjudging one's actions as submissive without a proper understanding of the whole structure is equally important to the kind of agency proposed by both scholars; an agency that goes beyond the oppositional figure and that may reflect the individual's discernment capacities to consider whether a situation is impairing her emancipatory attitudes and if so how she is able to change that. In relation to that, McNay considers that "the point of describing the world from the perspective of women's agency is to facilitate deeper understanding of the various ways in which gender inequalities are secured and to trace out possible pathways to empowerment" ("Agency" 49).

With the perspectives on agency posed by Butler and McNay, it is possible to carry on a study of agency within broader parameters of analysis, with the purpose of disclosing the situations in which women can have their experiences marginalized and their agency constrained, and most importantly showing the distinct manners in which they can overcome it.

In the next chapter I will develop the analysis of the short stories "Lilacs," "Sarah" and "A Fable," by Mary Lavin, in the context of Ireland in the first half of the twentieth century, considering particularly the situation of women in society, and using Lois McNay's and Judith Butler's concepts of agency as theoretical support.

> *The stories are subversive, dangerous even, in the way that human relationships, devoid of sincerity or morality, can themselves be. These complete pictures are not tales or anecdotes, they are instead fully-fledged, shocking reminders of how life is and has always been.*
> Evelyn Conlon[3]

3. FEMALE AGENCY IN MARY LAVIN'S EARLY STORIES: "SARAH," "LILACS," AND "A FABLE"

3.1 The Private Matters: Female Agency in "Sarah"

In "Sarah," third story in Lavin's debut collection *Tales from Bective Bridge* (1943), the homonymous female protagonist is a single mother whose sexual freedom scandalizes the dwellers in a small unnamed Irish town in mid-century Republic of Ireland. Besides having a bad name in the village, Sarah is also known for her diligent work as a cleaning lady – position she held when the whole chain of events which led to her misfortunes set off. While working temporarily for the Kedrigans, Sarah supposedly had an affair with Kathleen Kedrigan's husband, Oliver, who became then the suspect of being the father of Sarah's fourth unborn child.

Although "Sarah had a bit of a bad name" (Lavin 37) in town, the dwellers would not despise or offend her – at least not publicly. Their "defense" would consist of saying that Sarah was unlucky for having grown with two "rough brothers" (37) and without the presence of a father. The extent to which the townspeople were aware of Sarah's brother's – Pat and Joseph's – roughness towards her is left unclear, although Lavin provides information that may lead to the conclusion that Sarah was physically and psychologically abused by her brothers. For instance, when Pat – the eldest – decided to confront Sarah about her pregnancy and accused her of sending a letter to the Kedrigans naming Oliver the father of the unborn child, he "pushed her down . . . against the chair" (Lavin 42). When Sarah stood up to him saying – "What business is it of yours?" (42), trying to stay in her feet again, he "shouted . . . and

[3] Quotation taken from Evelyn Conlon's 1996 introduction to *Tales from Bective Bridge* (x).

pressed her back" (42). The use of force applied by Pat seems to be a reality in the Murrays' home; Joseph's silence and passivity with the situation turns him into an accomplice of Pat's abusive conduct towards Sarah. Mary Ryan (97) highlights that there were very few laws in Ireland to protect women in the domestic sphere: that is why so many cases have remained unreported. Ryan states:

> Domestic violence . . . was considered an issue to be discussed privately, and the silencing of female sexuality, which was often equated with "sin", meant that single mothers and other women who were seen to flaunt their sexuality were ostracized for their supposedly "deviant" behaviour. Both Church and state maintained that women should hold a certain morality, particularly relating to areas of sexuality and reproduction. (93)

If women had their private lives legally controlled by the State, under the Church's influence, it is not surprising that the ones who did not fit in that model, like Sarah, would be ostracized, both in the private and public realms. Prior to the 1937 Constitution, which, in my view, restricted women's rights, Irish legislations already complicated women's education and access to means of contraception, especially considering that, since 1929, any sort of information about abortion or contraception had been banned, and, since 1935, the sales and import of contraceptives had been prohibited in the country. David Pierce ironically declares that "Ireland was a Free State but, given censorship, emigration and no divorce, it was uncertain what exactly the adjective was describing" (177).

Since most of the population was devout Catholic, there was a great acceptance of Catholic beliefs, including the idea of women's "natural" inclination for domesticity. However, the awareness that women's conditions were determined by law increased considerably in the 1930s, therefore leading more people to discuss women's rights (Beaumont 564). If Ireland was a "Free" State in any terms, certainly it was not so for women.

The extent to which the State and the Church constrained women's lives is indisputable, given the aforementioned facts. Considering that women were systematically subordinated, one could affirm that they did have their emancipatory potentials severely compromised due to such constructed social relations of power and hierarchies related to gender.

Lois McNay notes that "agency is commonly understood as the capacity of a person . . . to intervene in the world in a manner that is deemed, according to some criterion or another, to be independent or relatively autonomous" (40). She highlights, however, that its conceptualization must not be overlooked merely as a series of abstract capacities or potentials. A greater understanding of agency encompasses also the acknowledgement that people as agents have their interactions underpinned by societal constructions and relations of power, which are undeniably present in any situation, at any time (41). In this sense, one could say that the Murrays' household works as a microcosm for a larger mechanism, that is, Irish society and its mindset. Joseph and Pat, as the representatives of society's dominant norms and patriarchal standards, tyrannize over Sarah who, in many ways, is placed at the margins of such configuration for being a single mother in mid-century Ireland.

The reason why Pat and Joseph are so angry at Sarah's fourth pregnancy, whilst they apparently accepted the previous ones, is not clear. Both Deirdre O'Byrne and Donna L. Potts argue that the brothers may have accepted the first three children because they would be used as a source of free labor, whereas, in the fourth pregnancy, Sarah was not willing to keep the responsibility only to her, and supposedly sent an anonymous letter to Oliver. Whether the letter was really written by Sarah or not, one is not sure. The fact is that Kathleen Kedrigan, in spite of Sarah's bad name, hired her because of her diligent work as a cleaning lady, while Kathleen herself was away to Dublin for medical purposes, Kathleen, later, intercepted the letter and handed it in to Sarah's brother, arousing his anger, which eventually led to Sarah's death. Until then, Pat and Joseph might have overlooked her unconformity to the social norms, and even disregarded her agency, blaming the country's "blackguards" (Lavin 39), in a reference to "the old Molloy or his like" (Lavin 43), who, unlike Oliver, were not married men, and would take the responsibility if "the need arose" (Lavin 43). However, they could not put up with Sarah's possible involvement with a married man, since marriage and the family unit were sacred institutions within Irish society. Therefore, in agreement with O'Byrne (2), the issue was not Sarah's pregnancy itself, but her threat to the *status quo* and her daring to expose her sexual demeanor publicly, which turned the situation unbearable for her brothers.

One may affirm that, precisely because the ruling norms presented such huge barriers to women's agentic potentials, Sarah had no other means to find her own way to empowerment other than subverting such idealistic and utopian views of women in her private life, manifested

through her sexual freedom. While the community seemed to tolerate the fact that she had given birth to three children out of wedlock and praised her for her qualities as a cleaning lady and for her religiousness, their "charity was tempered with prudence and women with grown sons, and women not long married, took care not to hire her" (38).

Sarah did not feel ashamed because of her pregnancies, nor seemed willing to reveal the paternity of her first three children. Even when confronted by the priest in one of the previous pregnancies, "Sarah took care not to let him catch sight of the child till the whole thing was put to the back of his mind" (40). Pat and Joseph, then, recalled that in her last pregnancy the priest had said that "a Home was the only place for the like of her" (39). A "Home" is a clear reference to the Magdalene Laundries – houses maintained by the Catholic Church in which women who gave birth out of wedlock, for instance, were sent "to serve as slave labor, stripping them of their identities, subjecting them to forms of brutality that led to many unexplained and unreported deaths, and leaving them in unmarked graves" (Potts n.p.). Sarah was not sent to a "Home" because her brothers needed a woman in the house to do the housework and look after the children, at least until the boys could be sent to work themselves. Their attitude reinforces the idea that women's place should be confined to the domestic spheres, taking care of the house, the children and the men.

Sarah is, nonetheless, placed in a two-sided spectrum: a single mother whose sexual behavior shocks people and the tireless worker who follows the Holy Church's commandments. Deirdre O'Byrne argues that "by performing an outward show of traditional Irish womanhood, devotedly Catholic and domestically competent" (7), Sarah becomes somehow accepted by the community, and subverts the ruling sexual norms in her private life. However, when her sexual behavior seemed to be a threat to the brothers' reputation by revealing that she was involved with a married man, Sarah "suffered the punishment of her era for women who demonstrated sexual agency" (Potts n.p.). Pat's anger towards Sarah is exemplified in the following dialogue:

> 'Answer me. Is it true what it says in this letter?'
>
> 'How do I know what it says! And what if it is true? It's no business of yours.'
>
> 'I'll show you whose business it is!' (Lavin 43)

Not accepting Sarah's resistance to his authority, Pat got in the room in which Sarah slept with her children, collected some of her personal belongings and threw one by one out of the door, until he pulled Sarah herself by the hair, dragging her out of the house. The scene thoroughly represents how Sarah had been constantly abused by her brothers, not only psychologically but also physically. Not only does Pat invade her personal space, but he does so repeatedly, which – as submitted by Potts – serves as a symbolic representation of how they had violated "her private space, and, by association, her, a little more intimately and brutally" (n.p). Ultimately, he threw her out in the cold and rainy night, to be found in the morning "dead as a rat. And the child dead beside her" (Lavin 44).

For Donna Potts, Kathleen is as culpable as Pat and Joseph for Sarah's death. When Oliver – newly married to Kathleen and who had possibly had an affair with Sarah when she worked for them – mentioned the anonymous letter and told Kathleen that it was "an unjust accusation" (Lavin 41), she stood impassive and told him to "take no notice" (42) if he was not to blame, and, in a quick move, she grasped the paper and threw it to the fireplace. However, we get to know, in one of the Murray brothers' dialogues, that Kathleen herself gave Pat the letter they all assumed was written by Sarah. The result of such intervention is already known. In addition, Potts declares that:

> Kathleen Kedrigan has clearly internalized the patriarchal double standard for women, and believes Sarah, not her husband, should be punished for the sin of adultery. Although Sarah's death, instigated by community-minded Kathleen, represents a triumph for the community, it is the triumph of the social hierarchy and of patriarchy, at the expense of personal freedom and of women's agency. (n.p.)

Women like Sarah, who subvert social standards, are often categorized as "monsters" for not complying with the idea of passivity and for not accepting to be treated as an object. These women, unlike the so-called "angels," need punishment for their transgression (Ryan 93). The dissemblance between Sarah and Kathleen goes from their nature to the roles they represent. While Kathleen is a "bleached out bloodless thing" (Lavin 39), Sarah had a "flux of healthy . . . blood in her face" (39); a mattress "slapped life" into Sarah's children, whilst Kathleen would go

to the maternity in Dublin to give birth to her first "long delayed" child. In their pregnancies, Sarah "worked even better than before and she sang at her work. She carried the child deep in her body and she boldly faced an abashed congregation at Mass on Sundays," distinctly from Kathleen, who "didn't go to Mass: the priest came to her. She was looking bad. By day she crept from chair to chair around the kitchen . . . She was self-conscious about her condition and her nerves were frayed" (41).

Despite Kathleen's devilish attitude towards Sarah, since nobody, apart from the Murray brothers, knew that she had delivered the letter causing Sarah's tragic end, she was still seen as the role model of woman and wife to society. In the end, her endeavor to maintain her image and her preoccupation to prove that she did have power over her husband lead her to consummate another woman's fate. In his study of Mary Lavin's work, Richard Peterson recognizes Sarah's potential for emancipation, but notes that the restrictive environment in which she was immersed ended up impairing her of fully achieving it: "Despite her natural goodness, she is destroyed by the moral righteousness of the 'anemic and thin-boned' Kathleen Kedrigan, the moral cowardice of Kathleen's husband, Oliver, and the cruel insensitivity of her own brothers" (30). Peterson also highlights the accentuated social critique presented in Sarah, and the contrast between the main character's positive ethos and the demands and constraints imposed on her by Irish society, which is – in fact – represented by the dwellers as a collective character in itself: "Sarah's death, instigated by Kathleen, represents a triumph for the community, but it is the triumph of the unnatural over the natural, the perversely conventional over the independent-minded" (30). Although some may insist on focusing on Sarah's marginalization, she was not conditioned by rules or societal norms. According to Potts, Sarah "represent[s] female agency and empowerment within a patriarchal society" (n.p.).

Although some critics have regarded Mary Lavin's thematic choices as "too private" and blamed her for not raising nationalist issues in her fiction, her object matter was not that common place, and by no means apolitical. In approaching the problems faced by Sarah as a single mother, Lavin called into question the extent of the Church's power on the State and consequently on the lives of historically marginalized groups. Whilst religion ruled people's lives, conditioning them to its relentless pattern, the ones, like Sarah, who, in some way, subverted such model, did so mostly privately, up to a certain extent. Sarah, however, decided to call responsibility for an act that had not been her choice only.

In not keeping her mouth shut, as expected, Sarah undermines the stereotype of the angelic woman, whose passivity and submission are supposed to be her main attributes. In not being complacent with her brothers' conduct towards her and in naming Oliver as the father of her fourth child, Sarah disrupts the ideal of womanhood highly valued within her community.

Whereas Sarah is portrayed both as victim and transgressor of society's moral duties, Kathleen Kedrigan personifies the role of woman whose object-passive like characteristics serve both the community and her matrimony. By orchestrating Sarah's misfortune with her brothers, Kathleen ends up discharging Oliver from any responsibility he might have had – although she never discusses the matter with him properly – for the sake of their union and because of the need to prove "her legitimate power over her man" (Lavin 38).

Kathleen and Sarah operate in divergent universes within the plot. Lavin uses physical descriptions of both women to construe and emphasize their antithetical psychological and corporeal mechanisms. Kathleen acts in accordance with what is expected from a woman within a religious and male ruled society, whilst Sarah's misbehavior threatens to disrupt the social order, and so she is silenced, suffering the most radical punishment: death. Moreover, as the town in which the story takes place is unspecified, but the reader acknowledges that it is a small town through the information provided, one may conclude that Lavin is making an inference to the mindset likely to be found in diverse places all over Ireland.

There is a range of possible interpretations for some of the issues in Mary Lavin's short story "Sarah." In regard to Pat and Joseph's involvement in Sarah's pregnancies, for example, Potts has suggested that one or both could be the father of one or more of her children. In addition, the origin of the letter naming Oliver the father of Sarah's child, the letter handed in to Pat, is debatable. It could be the first letter or a second one, written by Kathleen herself to incriminate Sarah. Yet, one thing is unarguable: although Sarah ends up being "driven underground" for her unconformity with the ideal of angelic woman, she does demonstrate agency in boldly confronting the priest, her brothers, for not denying her nature and keeping her sexual freedom in spite of the retaliation she could suffer. In agreement with Donna Potts, I conclude my analysis of the short story by affirming that "'Sarah' may be read as an effort to carve out a space for Irish women's history" (n.p.).

3.2 The Two-Sided Spectrum of Being: Female Agency in "Lilacs"

"Lilacs" exposes the fragile structure in which a family's union is built on. By making use of contrasting personalities, as exemplified by the sisters Kate and Stacy, and of diverging elements, such as the lilacs of the title and the dung heaps which constitute the family's main income, Lavin sheds light on the oft-troublesome relation different generations may face and how the familial microcosm might change if one decides to confront paternal authority.

Distinctly from the female protagonist in "Sarah," the women in "Lilacs," the opening story in *Tales from Bective Bridge*, are placed in a different context both in terms of their social position and of familial relationships. Whilst in "Sarah" the whole environment is presented as extremely constraining, starting from the macro – represented by society's regulatory mores ruled by the Catholic beliefs – to the micro, represented by the problematic relationship established between Sarah and her abusive brothers – the atmosphere created in "Lilacs" is much subtler and embedded in symbolisms. Yet, Lavin also explores the "wars of relationships" (Conlon v), as she brilliantly does throughout the collection; the obstinate protagonist in the story revealed herself, since the beginning, as an opposing force to the male imposed rules represented by her father.

Kate, the leading character in "Lilacs," is the older of two sisters who, after having finished their studies at a boarding school, returnes to their parents' house in an unnamed city in Ireland's countryside. The major issue in the story revolves around the sisters' disagreement with the fact that their father, Phelim Mulloy, is still carrying out his business on horse manure after so many years. As the reader gets to know, both of them grew up in dissatisfaction with their father's enterprise. The mother, Ros, who is also displeased by the manure dealing, is unable to confront him, in spite of her daughters' clamors. Although the three of them feel disgusted by the smell of dung, every Wednesday, when the farmers' cart comes to the Mulloys' cottage, the only one who has the guts to confront Phelim is Kate – whose determination to change her father's mind about his business outgrows the decorum she is supposed to have when talking to him. Interestingly, in spite of having been educated at a convent school, Kate does not demonstrate the "girlish prudery" so present in other stories by Lavin, in which the female characters – mostly as a result of the Catholic teaching – remains for a long time unaware of their subservient

position towards controlling male figures (D'hoker, "Beyond the Stereotypes" 421).

"Lilacs" stands out in Lavin's *oeuvre* for the presence of elements of contrast in the story, developed with the use of symbolisms and metaphors. Although critics have regarded Lavin's stories as an immersion in the deepest side of human emotion, "Lilacs" carries a peculiar and subtle use of irony, as a means of conveying – implicitly – the intricate nature of its characters. In this sense, the strength of the narrative lies in contrasting the Mulloys' reality – represented by dung heaps – with an idealized view of life – symbolized by lilacs. The plot, as a whole, is developed with the use of opposing elements: malodorous manure versus fragrant flowers; reality versus ideal world; family as a unit versus family as a frail microcosm. Most importantly, such opposites are embodied in the figures of the sisters Kate and Stacy, who, as characters, make explicit such divergent working mechanisms. The paradigms in Lavin's story, as noted by Bowen, depict "the conflict which underlies much of her work, that is, between the ideal, represented by the lilacs of the title, and the realities of the world" (47). Likewise, Fogarty highlights that "Lavin daringly constructs a vision of a family that centres not on harmony but on ordure" (56), and points to the use of irony as a means of criticizing the conservative values of Irish society as embodied in the acts of entire families and communities.

The sisters, Kate and Stacy, exemplify a trend in Lavin's early work: to counterpose pairs of female characters to enhance their distinct *modus operandi*, both in private and public realms in the story. This is also well exemplified in "Sarah," by the homonymous "tragic heroine" (Fogarty 60) as opposed to community-minded Mrs. Kedrigan. In "Lilacs," such dichotomies are outlined not only in terms of the characters' psychological construction, but also in the actual representation of their roles more explicitly within the plot. In general terms, Stacy – the youngest – daydreams about planting bushes of lilacs at their window so as to lessen the dung smell, which has been making her suffer with severe headaches since she returned from the boarding school. Kate, on the other hand, is a practical woman who sees no other means of getting rid of the dung if not by confronting her willful father, in spite of her mother and sister's fears of crossing him. Differently from her mother and sister, what bothered Kate is not exactly the smell of the manure, but the social stigma it represents when people become aware of the origin of her family's income.

The employment of contrasting personalities in Lavin's early stories is acknowledged both by Angelina A. Kelly and Richard F. Peterson in their analyses of her work. While the latter singles out the fact that such technique served the purpose of enhancing the already emotionally dense and often unresolved encounters between Lavin's characters, Kelly dealt more sympathetically with the dramas that compose the backbone of these early tales. For her, such paradigms work as a key point in character development as well as "symbolize preponderant leanings towards the external or internal world" (30), whilst offering to the characters – the "idealistic impractical Stacy and the hardhearted, ambitious Kate" (30) – a possibility for growing with such moral difficulties. Kelly refers to these opposing figures as the "Mary/Martha female types" (30), which D'hoker also draws attention to in her analysis of Lavin's female characters: "The Marys are sensitive, gentle but often weak souls. . . . The Marthas are strong, practical, but also opportunistic and domineering characters," like Stacy and Kate – respectively ("Beyond the Stereotypes" 425). Whereas Stacy's objection to the dung heap business is manifested through her headaches, Kate has a more direct approach to confront "what seems to be a male imposition" (Fogarty 56). Insofar as Stacy is a daydreamer and displays what could be considered a docile and submissive personality, she is praised by Ros for not confronting Phelim and for her good-nature: "You're a good girl, Stacy, a good, kind creature" (6). On the other hand, Ros blames Kate for her objectivity and practical demeanor – which she continues to manifest even after Phelim's death: "Say no more. . . . You were the one was always at me to torment him. Oh why did I listen to you? Why did I cross him?" (7). In spite of Ros's resented attitude towards her, Kate does not abandon her beliefs or felt guilty for having externalized her disagreement with Phelim, which seems to have exacerbated the tension amongst them as well as enhanced their opposing perspectives.

Interestingly, Kate's personality differs not only from her sister's, but, most importantly, from her mother's and father's, which places her in an even more delicate perspective within the plot. Being the one whose nature so defiantly contrasts her family's, she stands clearly isolated from the family cosmos. It is worth noting that, as in "Sarah," women whose behavior does not comply with the regulatory norms – in this case Phelim's precept of subservience and silence – can be placed in the category of "monsters," that is, women who refused "to conform to social expectations" (Ryan 93). On the other hand, women like Stacy, whose demeanor does not denote any sort of disruption to or insubordination

towards the controlling force – "women who abided by this idea of passivity," – can be considered "angels" (Ryan 93). Although Ryan makes use of the "monsters versus angels" dichotomy focusing mainly on women's sexuality, such terms might well be applied to social intercourses, for the expected relation of male dominance versus female subservience was also a reality, as well exposed by Lavin, within the family unit.

Kelly and Peterson have directed their sympathies to Phelim, taking the women's discordance with his enterprise simply as a female vagary – issue brought out by Peterson in his analysis of "Lilacs." A close reading however, may also point to Phelim's intransigence, stubbornness and inability to come to terms with or, at least, listen to the women's pleas. The dunghill represents Phelim's authority within the family unit, thus getting rid of it would attest his lack of power amongst the women. Kate, in fact, does not rebel against the dung heap *per se*, as the reader soon finds out, but she does rebel against the male tyranny, which is symbolized precisely by Phelim's attachment to the manure dealing.

As one gets to know in one of Kate's speech, the Mulloys "made plenty of money other ways as time went on" (Lavin 9), but Phelim would never give in to his idea of making money with the dunghill and, as Ros recalls, "he wouldn't stand for anyone putting between him and what he was bent on doing" (Lavin 7). Critics such as Elke D'hoker, Augustine Martin and Heather Ingman have singled out Lavin's inclination to approach the mother-daughter relationship in her fiction, theme developed from her early to late career, partly because of her own experience of raising three daughters by herself, after her first husband's death. However, the "ambiguous and problematic" father-daughter relationship, as remarked by D'hoker ("Beyonde the Stereotypes" 420), was also a central theme in her *oeuvre*. Nearly all of Lavin's father-daughter stories depict women's struggle to take the reins of their own lives, be that due to the way they had been raised or because of their dependent and subjugated position towards the male figure. "Miss Holland," Lavin's first story, written on the back of her discarded thesis, and also published in *Tales from Bective Bridge*, is a well-known example of such detrimental father-daughter relation. Miss Holland, of the title, was a single woman whom, after her father's death, felt unable to face reality and take control of her life, since her whole existence had been dedicated to serving and pleasing the dead man. "Lilacs," therefore, excels in Lavin's work for not carrying out such construction; unlike Miss Holland, Kate is depicted as a woman whose strength relies precisely on

her resistance to comply with Phelim's authoritarianism. In not accepting to establish a relationship of subservience or dependence, Kate copes with reality, willing to change it and change the ones around her.

Considering that Kate has been educated at a convent school, it is startling to see that her demeanor does not conform to the one expected of a young woman with such background in 1940s Ireland. It is worth noting that, since the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, and later, in 1937, with its overt influence upon the State and beliefs imprinted in the Draft constitution, presented by prime minister Éamon de Valera, the Church endeavored to strengthen its power and took control over major elements within Irish society, notably the education system and health policies. Margaret O'Callaghan explains that "in the predominantly Catholic partitioned twenty-six counties that became the Free State. . . Catholicism assumed a salience politically through its demographic weight and virtually unchallenged hegemony and through the very real influence exerted by the Catholic hierarchy on individual politicians" (124).

Catholic teaching, especially for girls, was highly regulatory and strict in its view of the ideal Irish woman. It represented a reassurance of the patriarchal bastions of society in the Republic inasmuch as it attempted to keep women under its excessive moral control, leaving Irish women in a situation of legal helplessness in their own country. The Republic was still far behind other countries in Europe when it came to gender policies towards a more equal nation for its citizens. One may, therefore, agree with Kilfeather's viewpoint regarding the Church's influence on women's rights in the Free State: it was "devastating" (106).

As discussed in the critical chapter of this thesis (Chaper 2 above), one of the main points in the feminist agenda – especially from the third wave of feminism onwards – is to shed light on ways in which women have always contributed to society, in spite of the common sense understanding that feminist studies merely attempt to scrutinize the ways in which women have had their freedom constrained due to strong-rooted ideologies, which impair emancipatory actions in various instances of societal construction. One of the main terms that has been discussed and reshaped in feminist theory is the concept of "agency," concept considered beyond the simplistic prism of the capacity of a sovereign actor, inasmuch as it "must be a fundamental and self-evident property of personhood" (McNay, "Agency" 41). Still, for a greater understanding of one's emancipatory potentials, the relations of power, which are

intrinsically ingrained in human interactions, must be considered, as well as the social and historical context in which individuals are inserted.

Unlike the protagonist in "Sarah," whose agency was portrayed through "subversion from within" (McNay, "Agency" 40), Kate adopts a distinct attitude to face the patriarchal rules which are personified in the figure of the dominant father. Instead of accepting a position of subordination and by finding diverse means to disrupt such established construction, in which women simply did not take a more active stand to make changes, Kate settles for a direct confrontation with Phelim. Lois McNay pinpoints the fact that there are different ways through which individuals can disclose their possibilities for emancipation, being "resistance to or dislocation of dominant norms" (*Gender and Agency* 10) one of them. Accordingly, Butler observes that gender performance and gender conventions, which are prior to the self-recognition of a gendered form, along with the relations of power and hierarchy involved are precisely the elements needed for a disruption of such determinants, on condition that the individual's demeanor indicates a reflexive mediation and acknowledgement of such engrained impairments. In this sense, one my affirm that Kate – in not accepting Phelim's impositions and facing a direct confrontation – does denote a position of agency in the form of resistance and also as a resignification of the family relations. Kate – as the one aware of and fighting against the subordinate relation established within the family unit – "struggle[s] over, appropriate[s] and transform[s] cultural meanings and resources" (McNay, *Gender and Agency* 10), which puts her in a position of active mediation.

Not only is "Lilacs" embedded in symbolisms, but it also counts on several turnarounds: the first and most significant one is Phelim's sudden death, which prompts Ros to reminisce about their youth, their courtship and even romanticize Phelim's undertaking of the manure enterprise. Fogarty observes that "the decision to abide by his principles appears nonetheless to exact a price" (56). Not only during her lifetime does Ros accept Phelim's effort to "enrich the roses in the gardens of middle-class women" (56), whilst she has her own vitality and bloom dried out, but she also feels terrible grief and guilt after his death, for having crossed him about his business. Whereas Stacy shares Ros's feelings of restlessness, Kate maintained the practical and unbothered posture that has characterized her actions, as the following dialogue shows:

> ‘Oh Kate. Oh Kate, why did we make her cross Father about the dunghill? I know how she feels. I keep reproaching myself for all the hard things I used to think about him when I’d be lying here in bed with one of my headaches.’
> ‘You certainly never came out with them!’ Kate said. ‘You left it to me to say them for you! Not that I’m going to reproach myself about anything! There was no need in him keeping that dunghill. He only did it out of pig-headedness.’ (Lavin 11)

As a means of paying homage to her dead husband, Ros – to her daughters’ outrage – decides to carry out the manure business, which slowly dries out what has been left of her vitality and energy. The short time she lives after Phelim’s death, which she never fully recovered, is dedicated to keeping his “gold rings of dung” (Lavin 7), or his legacy, alive. On a Wednesday, when the farmers’ knock on the cottage’s gate for an ordinary day of manure delivery, Stacy realizes that her mother has not woken up as usual. Kate, who has been denying any sort of help related to the manure enterprise, ignores the farmers’ calls and stays in bed. But she is really worried when Stacy does not reply to her calls. Once in her mother’s room, she finds Stacy collapsed on the floor and Ros indisputably dead in bed. The sisters, then, need to face another period of mourning and resettlement, now that they have to stand in their own feet. To Stacy’s surprise, Kate decides not to get rid of the dung business right away: “We’ll have to take it easy – wait and see how we stand, before we talk about making changes” (Lavin 17). Stacy’s thoughts about Kate reveal a lot of her sister’s approach to their sudden, new reality: “Kate was so capable. Stacy was filled with admiration for her. She would not have minded in the least getting up to open the gate [for the manure weekly delivery], but she never would be able to face a discussion of the future. Kate was able for everything” (18).

While one sees Stacy’s genuine appreciation for Kate’s active positioning, one also realizes that once both genitors have died, Kate’s major preoccupation changes for a more accentuated ambitious mindset, which is likely to continue regardless of Stacy’s naïve, almost childish behavior. Although surprising, Kate’s decision to pursue the dung business is not utterly unexpected, since her ambitious nature becomes clear as the plot unfolds. Stacy realizes how they differed from each other, as Kate starts to take over and make changes – related to the business as well as in the house. To start with, she leaves the room they have always

shared and moves to their parents' room and "a lot of things were thrown out" (Lavin 20), which may serve as a metaphor for the changes she is able to do now: as the eldest, she is responsible for them both. As Kate starts to make changes and set the uncomfortable demarcations between her and her sister, Stacy realizes how they differ from each other: "She had always thought Kate and herself were alike, that they had the same way of looking at things, but lately she was not so sure of this" (15).

Kate's first idea is to move with Stacy to a "more suitable house, larger and with a garden" (Lavin 19), and leave the old cottage solely to the "fertilizer" business, term between them to refer to the dung heaps. When things apparently settle down, Lavin makes use of another *volte-face*: Kate engages in a romantic relationship with one of the farmers and soon after, to Stacy's astonishment, gets married in a huge party thrown at the Mulloys' place, leaving Stacy – and her "airy romanticism" (Fogarty 57) – with the life they both had been rejecting. Stacy, left alone to take care of the property and the family business, tells the local solicitor, when asked about the future, that she intends to plant "a few lilac trees . . . where the dunghill has always been" (Lavin 23), to which he wittily replies: "But what will you leave on, Miss Stacy?" (23). In the end, the lilacs of the title end up serving as a symbol not only of the utopian view of the world, but of Stacy's own alienation to the realities of the mundane experience. Kate finds a way to break free from the moorings of family heritage – even though through "greed and materialist exploitation of sexuality, (Fogarty 57) related to her husband-to-be, the "whiskery farmer" to whom she gets engaged. Stacy's paralysis, more than reflecting what Bowen refers to as the "inescapability of one's fundamental life style" (34), reflects the inescapability of one's life choices.

Although Mary Lavin's *oeuvre* did not receive much critical attention until the 1960s (noting that her first collection was published in 1943), *Tales from Bective Bridge* has been, unarguably, the piece that has mostly attracted the attention of scholars such as Maurice Harmon, Augustine Martin, Roger Chauviré and, more recently, Anne Fogarty, Elke D'hoker and Theresa Wray. Not unsurprisingly, for the collection not only settled her interest in the inner lives of middle-class Irish people, but it also established her writing style, which placed her as one of the most prominent modernist writers in twentieth-century Ireland. Lavin's debut collection employs precisely what would become one of her most remarkable features: the use of modernist stylistics – the plotless short story which focuses on a specific happening in a delimited period of time,

inspired mainly by Russian and French short story writers – to such an extent that Anne Fogarty, Heather Ingman and Elke D'hoker compared her work to the ones by consecrated authors such as Anthon Chekhov, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Lavin's sort of disruption with the Irish storytelling tradition and its keen approach to a society deeply immersed in its ideological struggles along with her employment of modernist techniques placed her in an otherwise position within the Irish short story cannon. As pertinently noted in "Discontinuities: *Tales from Bective Bridge* and the Modernist Short Story," Fogarty's detailed assessment of Lavin's first volume, the author wittily played with the expectations induced by such regional, familiarly located title, whilst distilling her uneasy perspective of often unspecified locations in Ireland's countryside, as a means of depicting sharp social critique: "the comforting demarcations and reassuringly rounded plots apparently heralded never materialize. Lavin's volume thus plays with notional expectations of the Irish short story and uses a seeming conventionalism to mask its singular and jarring nature" (49). "Lilacs," as the opening story in *Tales from Bective Bridge*, carries a lot of such experimentalism and technical playfulness that relegated Lavin to a critical limbo for nearly two decades, as well as a severe criticism for her supposed lack of material content and political subject matter, so often applied by her male contemporaries. One must then agree with D'hoker, when she affirms that Lavin's placement outside the Irish short story canon owes a lot to the fact that she did not fit into stereotypes ("Beyond the Stereotypes" 415).

As part of her modernist enterprise, Lavin left much open to the readers' interpretations of her stories, shedding light on lives that had been ostracized – at least in the history of the Irish short story: those of people such as were mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers. Life also happened within the private, which did not cease because of the outer environment. The external world, although crucial for one's perception of reality, does not constitute the whole of one's existence. On the contrary, one's experience must also be sensed in one's private endeavors.

3.3. Beyond Stereotypes: Female Agency in "A Fable"

"A Fable," last short story to be analyzed in this thesis, displays a different approach to and portrayal of the female protagonist. Instead of placing the main character within the family unit, Lavin resorts to the motif of a newcomer in town and the community's inability to accept this woman – supposedly for her exceeding beauty – as a means of discussing

women's agency. The young woman, ostracized by the dwellers, suffers an accident which leaves deep scars on her face, leading to a change in the villagers' perception of her person. In this story, more explicitly than in the previous ones, Lavin presents harsh irony as regards Irish society, represented by this entire community.

"She was the most beautiful woman they had ever seen and so they hated her." Mary Lavin's opening sentence to "A Fable" (112), eighth story in *Tales from Bective Bridge*, raises the discussion about the hate towards women, female bodies and femininity. Bowen has observed Lavin's ability to define the topic of a story in its very first sentence, which is precisely the case of "A Fable." To begin with, one may pose relevant questions: Who is she? Who are they? Did they hate her merely for she was beautiful? One may also go further into the implications of such impressive opening revelation: did she know they hated her? If so, how did she feel? Did she display any reaction? Did she hate them back? Perhaps, the most appropriate question in such case is: did they hate this woman because her beauty did not reflect theirs?

The idea of beauty, although extensively discussed by philosophers, is difficult to define and is still subject of debate. Whereas some believe that beauty is an "objective feature of beautiful things," others take it as "subjective . . . 'located in the eye of the beholder'" (Sartwell n.p.). Crispin Sartwell analyzes the question of beauty from a more intertwined perspective, arguing that it is precisely the interaction between the object – the one who possesses the beauty – and the subject – the one who admires it, what makes its achievement possible. According to him, beauty would not exist if it were not for the subject's capability of contemplation, inasmuch as one's ability to "celebrate the real world" (n.p.) would not be possible, if there were no such things to be contemplated. Beauty, then, "emerges in situations in which subject and object are juxtaposed and connected" (n.p.).

Scholars such as Elke D'Hoker, Angelina Kelly and Richard Peterson, who have written critical pieces on Lavin's work, have only approached "A Fable" in terms of its explicit content including the conflicts between an outsider and the villagers, who (un)welcome her, supposedly because she was "so beautiful as to be quite perfect" (D'hoker, "Family and Community in Mary Lavin's Grimes Stories" 163). Elke D'hoker, for instance, has highlighted the impact of such beauty on the lives of ordinary people who could not deal or live with it ("Family and Community in Mary Lavin's Grimes Stories" 163-164). I decided, thus, to start this analysis establishing a parameter related to the

idea of beauty and its fulfillment in everyday life. I will not, however, approach exclusively the matters related to the metaphorical implications of beauty, as embodied in the figure of the female protagonist, and its impact on the lives of people – those who dwelled in the village in which the main character moved to. More than that, I will follow, as I have been doing since the beginning of this chapter, Augustine Martin's advice: "one will get no value at all from the stories of Mary Lavin by grasping the expository material, rapidly skimming the middle and attending closely to the end. The reason is that she is not concerned with telling a 'story' but with mirroring life" (396). I will, then, assume that Lavin is not merely telling us a fable – as the title itself suggests – but is indeed using the tale as a means of conveying a much broader message: to what extent did society have power over women's bodies and choices?

"A Fable," a third-person narrative, deals with the dense and conflicted relation between a whole community and a newcomer, who so thoroughly differed from the villagers, to the point of arousing their most negative and invidious feelings. Seemingly, what bothers those people the most was this woman's extreme beauty, for not a single flaw to their eyes she had – thus how could they possibly find any means of relating to her? The community's attitude only changes when her face gets scarred – which happens after an accident that leaves the villagers in shock and pity for her unfortunate fate. The irony Lavin presents here is precisely the difficulty of people to take others for who they are, for they only really embrace her after – even by an accident and against her will – she becomes a little more like them, a bit more human.

The young woman whose flawless beauty so strongly affected people's feelings, to the point of provoking "resentment and hostility" (Peterson 31), belongs to a group of characters in Lavin's *oeuvre* whose position as "outsiders" grants them ostracism. In "A Fable," the protagonist's placement as an outsider works both literally and metaphorically. Not only has she been raised out of the valley, but she also represents the outer world, which is not shared by the locals – presenting a double challenge in terms of that community's ability to accept her. Although the setting is unspecified, the narrator reveals to us that this woman has moved from the city to this unnamed place in Ireland's countryside, "to live in the house of her fathers that had been shut up for nearly a generation" (Lavin 112). The woman who so quietly arrives to inhabit a place which had belonged to her own family is received by suspicious eyes and hateful demeanor of the villagers. Subsequently to the abrupt revelation that opens the story, the narrator

gives a clue about people's inner concerns towards this young woman: "The women feared that she would dim their own glory, and the men disliked her because they felt she was inaccessible, even to the strongest and most fierce of them" (112).

The narrator gives us no plausible reasons or references that can lead to an agreement with such thoughts from the villagers. In fact, throughout the narration one may get closer to the community's mindset than to the woman's thoughts and feelings about who and what surrounded her. All we know is the dwellers' viewpoint, and all information provided about her is the villagers' perception of the facts. That is, actually, appropriate for the kind of social critique Lavin resorts to; the impersonal treatment given to the dwellers, with no provision of names or characterization – they are referred to as "the schoolmaster," "the postmistress," "the clergy," "the farmer's boy," or simply as "the villagers" – allows her to treat this whole community as a character in itself. Likewise, information regarding the protagonist's physical and personality traits are given by the dwellers, which one must not necessarily rely on, given their biased and probably distorted view of her:

> She was reticent, but that was quickly translated into ungracious. She was going to have the house redecorated. That meant, to the minds of the people in the valley, that she was a spendthrift. They further decided that, as like as not, she would give big parties when the house was ready and that they would be attended by young and very gay people. That meant that she was fast. And so the legend grew that this exquisite creature was hateful in mind and heart. (Lavin 113)

The previous quote is a clear example of the prejudicial and narrow-minded view the townspeople nurtures towards the newcomer. That can be explained, although not justified, considering the fact that as she does not belong to their community, she clearly does not share their social codes of behavior and morality, nor is she willing to fit into the contended molds of conduct followed by them. That is, there is more to bother them than merely her extreme beauty. She does not really care about differing from them, for she apparently is living the life as she pleases, regardless of the villagers' approval. She does not seem bothered by being different from them, but they do. They also hate her for not conforming to their provincial mindset, and for clearly diverging from

them in terms of following pre-established social rules which are not part of her reality.

Maurice Harmon has addressed the strength of Lavin's social critique, especially in her early stories (12), written during the period in which Ireland was struggling to establish its identity as a nation, after experiencing conflicts such as the Civil War and the Anglo-Irish War. In 1943, when *Tales from Bective Bridge* was first published, World War II was at its climax, affecting even countries that had declared neutrality, as the Republic did. The "Emergency" years, referring to the war period from 1939 to 1945, are considered by many a lost period in Irish history, for Ireland's isolation caused "economic depredations" (Brown 164) and decline, leading to fuel shortage as well as food and energy rationing by the government. Many and huge were the challenges Irish people faced at this time, which certainly contributed to the maintenance of a conservative and provincial mindset, instigated by the Church's enterprise in an attempt not to lose its force in nearly partitioned Free State.

Lavin's first movement towards being a creative writer, thus, dives deeply into the social structure set in mid-century Ireland, and her debut volume can be regarded as a "social response to implementation of the 1937 Constitution, the condition of Irish neutrality in the war, the relationship between religious and family authority and patterns of emigration," as observed by Wray ("Mary Lavin's First Short Story Collection" 239). Maurice Harmon also highlights Lavin's restlessness with the rigidity of the social system the Irish were immersed in, as well as the Church's influence over people's lives: "what she most resented was the way in which the Church kept people in ignorance, preferring passive obedience to the freedom that knowledge bestowed" ("Heartfelt Narratives" 12).

"A Fable" makes use of "the language of legend" (D'hoker, "Family and Community" 163) to disclose how much strongly rooted beliefs and ideologies can impair people's ability to truly acknowledge the world and people around them. The villagers, so immersed in their own prejudiced thoughts, acted as if a legion of domesticated zombies, unable to perceive that reality, and human beings, could harmonically coexist even if they do not share exactly the same background, beliefs, and history. Therefore, people's hostility to this outsider might ultimately have been provoked not by her supposed flawless beauty, but because of her unwillingness to fit into their stereotypes, and for them not recognizing on her their own reflection.

The impersonal character construction in "A Fable" corroborates the idea that Lavin is actually employing such technique to refer to much broader aspects within Irish society, as embodied in the actions of a whole community. Bowen ponders that Lavin's characters need to deal with "an inflexible social order and caste system, so well defined and predictable that Lavin can often treat a town collectively as a character" (24). Likewise, D'hoker points out to the villagers' inability to accept this outsider precisely for their contrasting nature and behavior, and concludes saying that "the villagers attitudes and gossip are somehow universal" (164), that is, the place nor the people needed to be specified, for that was the mindset likely to be found in any place in Ireland.

More than the outsider's non-conformity to the moral codes of behavior and conduct shared by the villagers, what really "get[s] on the nerves of the whole neighbourhood" ("A Fable" 114) is her seemingly disinclination and lack of effort to fit into their molds. Her beauty might have struck them, but her demeanor shocked them to the core, and so did the way she dressed: "She was wearing trousers like a man and the lines of her lovely body were seen in silhouette against the blue breast of the sky" (113). The people she gets along with and the parties she throws at her place – with the presence of even more outsiders: "Her own friends came from the city, and the windows in the big house on the hill were lit all night and patterned over with the passing and repassing of human figures" (114). Presumably, that was not the demeanor that an "ideal" Irish woman should show in mid-century Ireland. The ruling systems – the State, with the 1937 constitution which confined women's role merely to the functions of wife and mother (Beaumont 563-575); and the Church, with its overt influence upon legal decisions, the cult of the Virgin Mary and the ideal of motherhood, moral behavior and purity it represented (O'Callaghan 125) – exerted ideological power on important instances of societal construction. These were forces that guided Irish people's lives and actions. It is, thus, not surprising that the ones who somehow subverted such ideals would suffer sanctions and moral punishments.

There seems to have been an agreement amongst scholars in terms of Lavin's harsh critique of post-revolutionary Irish society. Her less idealistic viewpoint contributed to a sort of narrative which did not necessarily need to rely on the "rebellious hero" (Harmon 11); its focus was indeed on the ordinary lives which, apparently, were not sufficiently worth of attention for her male contemporaries. Lavin did not seek to understand how and why society functioned in certain ways, but how and why individuals were impelled to act in certain ways because of that

society. Fogarty considers that "the nondescript provincial lives that Lavin depicts may be seen as mirroring the insular and inward-looking nature of Irish society under Éamon de Valera" (55), whereas Bowen refers to it as "Lavin's imagined but not-so-fictive world" (34). Likewise, Wray points out to the author's employment of "hostile natural environments" as a means of externalizing her uneasiness with "the status quo" (250).

In distinct ways, the protagonists who are the focus of this thesis do precisely what Lavin did in her writing: they defy the dominant societal norms and subvert them in particular and adjusted fashions, which correspond to the diverse and specific relations of power, hierarchy and social construction they are inserted in. The fabulously beautiful outsider of "A Fable," whose demeanor so strongly differs from the villagers to the point of provoking hostility and hate, challenges the *status quo* in keeping her way of life in spite of people's judgment. She displays a type of "individual agency," as pointed by D'hoker ("Beyond the Stereotypes" 421): one's own responsibility towards her choices and actions.

D'hoker's assessment of Lavin's female characters offers a plural account of motif, character construction, and social critique. She argues that Lavin's stories are not so much concerned with placing women as naturally victimized individuals, but with putting them in a position of equality if compared to men. Although the relations of power exist, it is not surprising to see domineering women outnumbering domineering men, for "Lavin's women are not simply victims of a given system or of its embodiments but individuals who are given both the power and the responsibility to think and to act for themselves" ("Beyond the Stereotypes" 421).

The fact that the protagonist in "A Fable" does not give in to the community's constrictive and repressive mores depicts in itself an act of resistance or, as put by McNay, "a subversion from within" ("Agency" 40). Akin to D'hoker's idea of "individual agency," McNay observes the various means in which agency can be displayed, and singles out the creative and innovative modes one may resort to: "a creative dimension to action is the condition of possibility of certain types of autonomous agency understood as the ability to act in an unexpected fashion or to institute new and unanticipated modes of behavior" (*Gender and Agency* 22). Such acknowledgement of diverse strategies used to depict one's emancipatory potentials meets the need of the reconfiguration that the

concept of agency has been suffering, mainly due to transformations in gender relations.

McNay advocates an idea of agency which enables individual's particular strategies to overcome strongly rooted social impairments. Although agency is a universal potential, it needs to be situated within a specific cultural and social context ("Agency" 42) – which leads to the account of agency and emancipatory potentials also as an active mediation within social intercourse, thus establishing a "critical awareness that arises from a self-conscious relation with the other" (McNay, *Gender and Agency* 5). Butler's treatment of the question of agency – through performativity theory – also addresses the issue of one's acknowledgement of constraining events to the extent that, once aware of such structure, a possibility for agency is outlined. Insofar as gender and gender relations are a result of performed acts, ingrained in cultural norms of behavior, if one ceases to perform and perpetuate those acts, a space for subversion is created. For Butler "all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; 'agency,' then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition" (*Gender Trouble* 185). Considering that the protagonist in "A Fable" does not correspond to society's expectations, for the choice of not abiding to that community's pre-established norms portrays a means of disrupting such construction, one may affirm that she does demonstrate awareness regarding her agentic potentials; therefore she depicts an attitude of active mediation and individual agency in face of the villagers' hostile demeanor towards her.

One day, riding down the hill, under the watchful eyes of the dwellers, the lovely woman in a sudden move stumbles over the ditch, and "a branch of brier switched her face and its thorns tore into her flesh . . . she lay where she fell, silent, still, face-upwards, in the grass-tangled ditch" (Lavin 115). Stunned by the accident which scares that lovely and flawless countenance, the villagers change their posture utterly, and so does she: "for two years she lived quietly in the valley, beloved by all those who dwelt in it with her" (116). If once she threw parties at her place and received the visits of stunning male and female friends – arousing the community's contempt and envy for the ones who could properly relate to her – that changes after "the branch of brier switched her face." (114)

Once she can no longer carry on with the life she has been living, and has to adopt a more recluse life, for the sake of her recovery, the townspeople can finally "love and admire her" (D'hoker, "Family and

Community" 164). Even when she decides to go through plastic surgery in a foreign country, in an attempt to heal the scars, "they were glad, and they lit candles for her safety in the chapel" (Lavin 117), but do not truly believe her face can turn to be perfect as it once was. The narrator clearly satirizes the villagers' behavior, for their narrow-mindedness and selfishness prevent them from genuinely bonding with her: "The whole village felt that life was very cruel, and so they lined themselves up as allies of its most pitiful victim" (116). The seemingly supportive behavior of the townspeople in regard of the healing surgery, actually, discloses the ironic and contradictory nature of their supposed acceptance. They pray for her safety, "but for her return to beauty and perfection they did not pray, because they did not believe that such a thing was possible, and furthermore they did not remember what she looked like when she was perfect, and still furthermore they had loved her as she was" (118).

Unable to truly embrace her, the dwellers act with ignorance and revulsion for this woman's real nature. When she is back in town, "completely cured" (Lavin 119), they still believe that eventually the scars will "show out through the new skin again" (120). As time passes by, and the lovely woman with that lovely face grows old, faint lines appear on her porcelain skin, making the ones who knew about the accident – which so badly scarred her – believe that "the prophecies of their fathers [had] come true" (120), that the scars are not healed, that she has never been completely cured after the accident which had shocked them all.

The inhospitable village of "A Fable" works as much as a representative of Irish society's conservative mindset as it works as an embodiment of mid-century Ireland ruling systems. The female protagonist, who causes such fuss because of her beauty, functions as a representative of those individuals "wandering about the fringes of society," or the so-called "lonely voice" to which Frank O'Connor (19) famously referred to. Accordingly, if "the short story represents . . . our own attitude to life" (O'Connor 13), the argument that Lavin's fiction is too restricted to private issues falls apart, for it is precisely the public framing of people's demeanor, and its consequences in one's life, that is the driving force of "A Fable." Thus, beauty, which seems to be the protagonist's main inconvenience, is merely a reflection of society's incapability of welcoming anything which differs from its idealized viewpoint of human, and more specifically, women's demeanor. The "psychological complexity" of Lavin's fiction, as remarked by Ingman (184), is well exemplified in "A Fable," once the seemingly simplistic

view of its plot merely as the impact of exceptional beauty upon ordinary people may seem to disregard its emblematic portrayal of individual, and most importantly, female agency within an ingrained system ruled by patriarchal norms.

As observed in "Sarah," with the homonymous protagonist, and in "Lilacs" with Kate, be in the private or public realms, individuals who do not conform to society's inflexible and ruthless patterns are doomed to ostracism and marginalization. In this sense, although divergent in their scope, "Sarah," "Lilacs," and "A Fable" present cross-linked narratives in terms of their approach to lives whose alternative position within a very strict societal construction leaves them dispossessed of any sort of mercy from part of the community. These women, however differently, find a way to cope with reality and exercise an attitude of agency.

> *You have instinctively taken the viewpoint of the artist, detachment. You explain, you do not approve or blame, because it all would be so useless: people are what they are, because they can't help it, and there it is, and there is no more to be said.*
> Roger Chauviré[4]

4 CONCLUSION

An Arrow in Flight: Mary Lavin's Writing Enterprise

As I approach the final pages of this study, I shall begin this section readdressing some of the main topics discussed throughout the thesis. Initially, I will focus on the Critical Chapter (Chapter 2 above), in which I approached the history of the Irish short story, more particularly its modern trends, and also offered a brief overview of Lavin's creative writing enterprise in the genre. My main objective here is to revisit some of the main critical points encompassing both Irish short story and Lavin's fiction, making a general overview of both positive and negative criticism concerning her work, correlating it with my own perceptions as regards the storytelling tradition in the Republic altogether with Lavin's unique insight to it. Subsequently, I will offer my conclusions from analysis of the female protagonists in the short stories "Sarah," "Lilacs," and "A Fable," discussing my general and specific objectives as well as my research hypothesis, linking it with both the historical aspects addressed and the concept of female agency. Finally, I shall offer some of my observations and conclusion for future research on Lavin's work.

Twentieth-century short fiction in Ireland, with its hybrid nature and roots that run both in the Gaelic storytelling tradition and in the Anglo-Irish world, has made its mark in terms of being an important medium in the literary tradition in the Republic – being considered by scholars such as Elke D'hoker ("Complicating the Irish Short Story" 3), Heather Ingman (*A History of the Irish Short Story* 2), Anthony Burgess ("Preface," *Modern Irish Short Stories* 15) and Frank O'Connor (*The Lonely Voice* 206) as the genre in which Irish writers are most successful.

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[4] Quotation from letter sent by professor Roger Chauviré to Mary Lavin, in 1945. Archive material available in University College Dublin – Special Collections.

A brief overview of modern Irish short fiction would indisputably count on George Moore's *The Untilled Field* (1903) and James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914), pinpointed by D'hoker ("Complicating" 10), Ingman (*A History of the Irish Short Story* 9) and O'Connor (*The Lonely Voice* 37-39) as the forerunners of the genre in Ireland. O'Connor himself, altogether with Liam O'Flaherty, Sean O'Faoláin and Elizabeth Bowen are acknowledged to be leading names in the twentieth-century short fiction in the Irish Republic. Bowen, surprisingly, is one of the few women to inhabit the literary hall of fame, which was traditionally – not only in terms of short story writing, but in the Irish literary scenario in a broader sense – dominated by men. Indeed, when it comes to literature written by women, the matters of publicity, recognition and criticism seem to be more problematic than they ought to be, especially for female writers who have an extensive body of work, comprising a great variety of themes and having published in diverse periods throughout the century. Such is the case of Mary Lavin, prolific modern short story writer, who was relegated to a critical limbo of nearly two decades after having published her first collection, *Tales from Bective Bridge*, in 1943. This could be explained, although not justified, by her unwillingness to work in favor of the male readership tradition which – as exemplified by O'Connor's and O'Faoláin's thematic enterprises – sought to praise nationalist issues through "the portrayal of the rebellious hero by putting them on the emigrant ship." Lavin, as exposed by Maurice Harmon, "never needed that solution" (11). Her formative years in America allowed her to have a critical view of Irish society, as opposed to the passionate, idealistic view, often expressed by those writers who abided by the idea of a national consciousness based on a revolutionary construction of Irishness. Also, Harmon argues that Lavin's main subject-matter, apart from the harsh social critique that she resorted to as a means of exposing an excessively provincial society in her early tales, was that of the "affairs of the heart, emotional struggle, and the complexity of the individual temperament" (12). Yet, throughout her long writing career, Lavin had been through various different phases in terms of thematic choices, as well as developing her writing style in terms of modernist experiment with short fiction (Fogarty 50).

Lavin's *oeuvre* comprises stories that deal with troublesome family relationships, the striking influence of the institutions of State and Church on the individual's life, and the exposure of various external social moods and their consequences for the lives of ordinary people (Harmon 12). Later, her fiction evolved to be more thoughtful writing, dealing with the

motif of artistic expression and the artist's eternal pursuit of mirroring the depth and complexity of human demeanor as embodied in common lived experiences. For Harmon, the "artistic struggle" was an ongoing theme in Lavin's middle phase as a writer, for she "thought of the artist as a kind of Christ figure giving his life for others" (19). Lavin's maturity both in personal and in authorial terms had a direct effect on her writing – which ultimately became accentuatedly inward-looking, imbued with a stress in psychology, and philosophically stressed, overtly dealing with her own particular life experiences. Harmon highlights that Lavin's middle to late stories commonly approached "examinations of widowhood" (25), as well as the mother-daughter relationship – often delicate, since when young Lavin herself had become a widow, with three small daughters to raise, and no sort of practical help from family or friends.

It is assumed that she found it difficult to overcome her first husband's death, leading her to a difficult period suffering from depression, in which she had to delegate her children's education to a private institution until she could fully recover from such a long period of grieving. In a letter to a friend, dated from 1982, she confessed: "things have not been good to me for a long time" (Archive Material[5]). If Lavin's personal life had always been full of vicissitudes, professionally she was quite successful, regardless of the often unwelcoming, relentless criticism directed at her approach to the short story. In 1958, she obtained a contract with *The New Yorker* (Harmon 13), shortly before becoming an award-winning writer: she was granted the Guggenheim Prize twice, in 1959 and 1961 (Harmon 13). Lavin's background – starting from her early education in America where she knew a less restrictive and conservative society, the shocking contrast of life in Ireland, and her burdensome life as an adult – undeniably reflected on her work as a writer, not surprisingly placing her in a situation of contrast to the writing of her contemporaries. Far from being a privileged person, Lavin adopted a stance that would allow her to give voice to those "submerged population groups" (20), people whom Frank O'Connor often attributed as being the feedstock of the short story, the ones that stand apart from society as much as the short story does: "individualistic . . . intransigent" (21).

Concerning her treatment of the characters in her fiction, Lavin has explained: "I've written about people who disregarded all they were taught and did what they thought and found it was right" (Wray 90). These people, it is well known, were often ostracized for their lack of conformity

[5] July 1st, 1982. Letter to John.

to social mores and codes of morality and behavior – particularly when it came to women subverting such ideals. The focus of this thesis – the representation of women in Lavin's early stories – also raised question on the criticism of her depiction of Irish society, and her supposedly excessive focus on "the life of the kitchen" (211), as O'Connor has uncompromisingly defined her subject-matter. While affirming that "the short story *can* deal with life that goes underground" (207), O'Connor failed to recognize that such life was not solely constituted by the rebels and exiles whom he so much praised. By not finding such endeavor in Lavin's work, and his seeming discomfort with her modernist technique, led him to a sharp and ruthless judgment of her fiction. Lavin's artistic viewpoint, as well as her admiration for the "subtlety of women's minds" (Harmon 25), had practical effects on her writing, in which she sought to expose – sometimes not explicitly – the dangers of the Irish society of her time. In these terms, D'hoker wittingly states: "Frank O'Connor makes it quite clear that the proper place of women is at home with the children, and not in the company of the great men of letters" ("Beyond the Stereotypes" 416).

Notwithstanding the wide range of thematic choices Lavin resorted to, and the fact that she did not think of herself as a representative of a specific gender, as declared in an interview (Wray 90), her work speaks for itself in terms of giving voice to particular groups within society which have been, historically, marginalized. Lavin's overt concern with class issues, and her sharp critique to middle-class Irish people – particularly in *Tales from Bective Bridge* – is as strong as was society's stifling social construction on the lives of the aforementioned groups. Mid-century Ireland, under Éamon de Valera's government and the Church's striking influence, represented an impairment for women's full achievement of rights before the law. That, as previously discussed in the critical and analytical chapters of this thesis, had a direct impact on the lives of women, especially those who were – for varied reasons besides gender – still placed as hierarchically inferior. Gender by itself certainly represented a huge impairment for one's freedom, in a broader sense as citizens, and in specific terms as an individual within a family or community environment. For such reasons, Fogarty has acknowledged Lavin's "feminist undercurrents" (51); likewise, Ingman recognizes that the "extent to which Lavin's stories portray women enmeshed in a variety of social restrictions, whilst not classifying her automatically as a feminist, nevertheless highlights her awareness of the severe constrains on Irish women's lives" (*A History of the Irish Short Story* 172). For

D'hoker, Mary Lavin's work "does not fit the stereotypes" ("Beyond the Stereotypes" 415), both in terms of her unwillingness to follow the nationalist portrayal of "rebels and exiles," as put by Richard Peterson (145), and also in terms of her avoidance of dealing with women's issues from a contemporary feminist perspective, placing women merely as "victims" of a given ruling system (D'hoker 416). Still, she praises Lavin's employment of "individual agency" and her characters' effort to cope in the face of impairing events that might pervade one's everyday life events and choices.

Augustine Martin ("A Skeleton Key to the Stories of Mary Lavin") and D'hoker ("Beyond the Stereotypes: Mary Lavin's Irish Women") have recognized Lavin's significant, if outlier, position within the Irish short story canon. What is intriguing, though, is: why should things be this way, if one considers the length of Lavin's creative writing career and the amount of works she produced? Both critics single out some ideas that might shed light on the reason why such a productive writer had been relegated to a second-level category in the Irish short story tradition. In her essay, D'hoker offers an overview of Lavin's main treatment of the female characters in her fiction, and concludes that "Lavin has been unfairly judged" (416) for not conforming with the tradition of praising politics or nationalist issues, and for her lack of attention to "typical Irish themes" (416) – that is to say, those of the rebellious hero, the untamed combatant, the Ascendency, and the dominance of the Catholic Church as a respected institution within Irish society. On the contrary, Lavin's attention was turned to ordinary Irish people: shopkeepers, clerks, farmers, lonely widows, outsiders ("Beyond the Stereotypes" 416). Similarly, Martin's assessment of Lavin's work – in fact, one of the first critical essays to be published on her oeuvre – deals with the "critical neglect" around her writings and further discusses the matters of form and style concerning her early works (considering that his essay was published in the 1960s and Lavin would continue to write and publish until the late 1980s). Martin's point, however, is straight: "Lavin is outside the tradition" (394), he affirms, offering the opinion that such placement is likely to be the result of an "extra-literary concern" (393) rather than of Lavin's aptitude as a writer. By including more of the stories by the Russian and the French, rather than paying an explicit homage to the Irish storytelling practice – in other words, by not adhering to that tradition of the Republic, Lavin somehow placed herself in a territory other then the motifs often used in short fiction by her

contemporaries, which ended up flying in the face of the radical, strict, and male-focused light thet they shone.

Despite such barriers in the criticism, or rather, the lack of a more consistent, less shallow critique of Lavin's body of work, she had the benefit of many people who genuinely believed in the power of what she had to say, and how she sought to say it. In the preface to *Tales from Bective Bridge*, Lord Dunsany – Lavin's primary supporter and mentor – insightfully made an analogy between her working mindset and those of her predecessors and counterparts. Up to a certain point, Dunsany's words seemed to foretell the severe criticism she would suffer in the subsequent years: "the bold plots and the startling events of the modern thriller are to these tales what a great factory is to the works of a gold watch. Those looking for great engines running at full blast might overlook the delicacy of the machinery of such a watch" (xvii). Therefore, instead of blaming Lavin for her supposedly lack of substantial subject-matter, one must attentively read her stories, for in them we must find the essential character of one's response to society's demands and people's attitude to that response. Even so, criticism seems to have failed in terms of acknowledging that such changes in modern Ireland, at a time – in the 1940s, when she first published – in which the disenchantment with revolutionary Ireland was a general feeling, being inevitably reflected in literary works. Lavin's fiction certainly responds to such external social moods, hence blaming her for not raising typical Irish themes can be seen as something of a shallow and reckless accusation. Few things could be more current subject, in the Republic of the 1940s, than women's overt lack of rights before the law and society's blind connivance with it, or the Church's striking influence on the lives of these women – who were often ostracized when they did not conform to such beliefs and codes of conduct – as in the example of Sarah, the homonymous character in the first story discussed in this thesis.

In the 1996 introduction to *Tales from Bective Bridge*, Evelyn Conlon also underlined the evident contrast between Lavin and, mainly, her male counterparts: "The men had gone realistic, were concerned with old suspicions, still had the sounds of guns ringing in their ears" (v-vi). In addition, she highlights the unsurprising fact that Lavin was writing in a time when "no list of writers admitted more than one woman for every twelve men" (Olsen qtd. in Conlon vi). She also emphasizes Lavin's awareness of the limited time she had to write, since, unlike male writers, she did not have no-one to help with her domestic roles, and thus had to be much more concise when producing. Mentioning an interview with

RTÉ, Conlon states: "She implied that consequently the work was of a more consistent caliber. She believed that she gained enormously from her responsibilities. This is indeed an extraordinarily encouraging thing for a writer of her stature to say" (vii). By declaring that, Lavin depicted – as much as the female protagonists analyzed in this study – a position of active mediation in the face of the notorious differences between women's and men's roles in society, both in private and professional terms. Such awareness is undeniably present in her works, with special attention to the short stories that constitute the corpus of this thesis.

Lavin's seemingly "too-feminine" subject-matter is put to the test in "Sarah," "Lilacs," and "A Fable." The apparent homogeneity suggested by the collection title, *Tales from Bective Bridge*, in practice, never materializes. What it shows, indeed, is that Lavin herself had a very particular way of looking at things, and an even more peculiar manner of conveying it. The stories analyzed in this thesis function as clear demonstrations that, in fact, Lavin's fiction is not as naïve and self-centered as it has been perceived as being. These tales present to the reader an accurate depiction of life in mid-century Ireland with all its ruling systems carefully, although not always explicitly, exposed, as a means of uncovering the working mechanisms of a society in which class and gender served as parameters on how citizens should be treated or not. In that sense, it is not surprising to see critics struggling to fit Lavin into a specific critical approach or placing her within a branch in the Irish short story genre.

To begin with, I shall highlight Lavin's varied approaches to the issues faced by women in 1940s Ireland, more specifically in "Sarah," "Lilacs," and "A Fable" – stories which, in spite of having three female protagonists who somehow struggled to fully achieve their roles as proper citizens within certain societal structures, present to the reader the spectacle of such construction taking place through diverse, unsettling realities. That, *per se*, shows that Irish women should not be placed into a single category, or considered to be all facing the same struggles – and also that they should not be taken as mere passive receptors of the embedded structures. Although they were all under the same strict hierarchical structure, built by historically and intentionally legally secured under de Valera's government, the responses of different women to these elements of that structure that indisputably ended up affecting the will of each of them differently, for each of them was embedded in a different microcosm, whether in terms of family unit, community relationships or, equally important, background.

By examining the homonymous character in "Sarah," Kate in "Lilacs," and the unnamed protagonist in "A Fable," my main objective was to find out whether these female protagonists were represented as women whose demeanor depicted a position of agency in the environments in which they lived. Through a comparative analysis of the three of them, I aimed at establishing whether and how they were constructed as women whose placement in society and response to society's demands were similar, in spite of their diverging social positions. My research hypothesis was that these women, regardless of the stifling *milieu* likely to be found in mid-century Republic, did in fact adopt – and practice – a position of active mediation.

It is possible to cross-link the narratives in terms of their setting – Ireland's countryside – and in the sense that these protagonists, somehow, had their freedom put to the test. The stories, however, are so well-built and developed that a less attentive reading might fail to detect a very significant detail in terms of the construction of the characters. To reflect upon such statement, I shall start posing a question: the impairing events that presented a challenge to these women's agency were represented solely by society's ruling systems? Although societal construction did indeed play a major role in terms of constraining their emancipatory potentials, the proper answer for such a questions is: no. The fact is that, to shed light on such provincial attitude regarding women's roles, Lavin made use of society's microcosms as embodiments of a greater mindset.

The three protagonists, therefore, faced different repressing experiences, to the extent that the relation to the world surrounding them differed. Sarah's fate, for instance, was directly related to the family unit and to society's codes of morality and behavior. Kate, on the other hand, suffered endless trouble, mainly related to her father – who in turn did personify society's patriarchal reasoning – thus her greatest impairment came basically from the family. In "A Fable," the protagonist was placed *vis-à-vis* to a whole community, treated by Lavin as a character in itself, representing in broader sense society's narrow-minded attitude towards women. In these terms, one of my conclusions was that not only was Lavin aware of the extent to which women had their agentic potentials constrained, but that in her work it happened in ways that turned out to be uneven, just as the individuals' mechanisms for coping with such events differed.

As discussed in the critical chapter, based on texts by Butler and McNay, the concept of "agency," or one's emancipatory, agentic potentials (terms used interchangeably in this thesis), can be realized and

externalized in different, even startlingly different, ways by individuals. One of my specific objectives was to find out whether these protagonists depicted a position of agency or not. I conclude that, indeed, they did have a position of agency: they certainly acted as active mediators in the face of the constraining environments in which they were inserted. However, they did so differently, which reinforces McNay's positioning that the specific historical and social context, as well as one's placement within that context, will have a direct influence on the individual's assimilation, reaction, and interpretation of such events, leading to different ways of fighting against it. An important conclusion is that, although the three protagonists did cope and demonstrated agency, they did so differently, for – as McNay has put it – the ways in which individuals realize agency are different, and not straightforward.

Sarah, protagonist of the first short story analyzed, subverted the ideal of womanhood in her private life, by not abiding to society's puritanism regarding women's sexuality, by not feeling ashamed because of her pregnancies and by not giving in to her brothers' threats. In this sense, Sarah's agency is the one Butler attributes as "freedom from constraint," since aware of the extent to which she was already marginalized for having conceived three children out of wedlock, Sarah opted for disrupting such pre-established beliefs as regards women's sexual freedom in her private life. Kate, on the other hand, presented a type of agency which could be interpreted as "resistance." She daringly confronted her father – whose role represented the patriarchal norms of society within the family unit – not accepting his resistance to the changes she considered urgent and crucial for the family's well-being. Even though, later on, she was tempted by ambition, and became accentuated selfish, acting merely in favor of her own interests, it is the fact that her impulse was clearly motivated by her will to break free from the stifling norms her father had imposed on the family – leading to the conclusion that she, indeed, demonstrated her emancipatory potentials. In "A Fable," the unnamed character depicted yet another type of agency; the main conflict in the story is a whole community's non-acceptance of an outsider's demeanor, which clearly defies their strongly-rooted codes of morality and behavior. Lavin treats this community as a character, as a means of exposing the extent to which ruling institutions, such as the State and the Church, impacted people's life choices, their experiences and their degree of acceptance of whatever is "different." By placing the fabulously beautiful woman in opposition to the community, Lavin shows her subject's individual agency in not conforming to what that

community's expectations for her appearance and behavior. This argues that individual agency, therefore, is strictly related to one's being able to perceive that a situation represents a possible challenge, and the fact that this awareness awakens one's consciousness to cope with it. For this protagonist, then, by not complying with what was expected from her as an outsider – she whose behavior diverged utterly from that of the local people – demonstrated her awareness that she had agentic potentials.

For future research, a possible new path for approaching Lavin's fiction might be to analyze the representations of male characters, as regards masculinity, and how it was socially and historically constructed in the Republic of Ireland. Another approach might be to use the concept of agency to analyze Lavin's widow stories, which were written later on in her career, and thus dealt with a different historical construction in terms of women's position within society. A further possibility would be a comparative analysis between one or more of the short stories chosen for this study and one or more of Lavin's stories in which the female character surrenders to her fate, unable to cope with pre-established beliefs and hierarchical constructions. Another interesting comparative analysis could be made between Lavin's female characters and James Joyce's "Eveline," by using the idea of paralysis. Since Lavin has an extensive body of work, there are innumerous possibilities of studies not only on her short fiction, but also on the novels she published.

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ANNEX

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