

## Thesis Abstract

It is hard to safely locate Mary Lavin in the critical discourse as for many decades she has been subject to various approaches concerning her categorisation. Even though Mary Lavin lists as an Irish writer, she was considered apolitical in her works which led to her problematic “exclusion” from the Irish literary tradition. Her works were not always considered feminist in a contemporary sense and have only been placed in a feminist framework with mixed success. This thesis deals with the issue of her placement in the Irish canon and feminist critical literature, aiming to prove that Lavin’s significance in both discourses is possible due to her realistic portrayal of universal human traits and issues associated with the life of the Irish middle-class, its traditions and conventions, with a particular attention paid to womanhood and its ordeals. This is achieved by focusing on the prominent notion of solitude in the social space primarily exemplified in the female characters of her stories. While social space is incompatible with the typical concept of solitude as the physical absence of other people, what is relevant in terms of Lavin’s short stories are the states of social disengagement, such as mental loneliness and alienation used as a way of detachment of oneself from other human beings. My chief argument is that Lavin’s female characters do not experience a mere feeling of loneliness, but rather a state of mental and emotional disengagement from themselves and society which is enforced by the oppressing social conventions and Catholic church. This leads to a substantial chasm between the female characters, often discouraging them from communication, and perpetrating stigmas around womanhood.

The thesis closely looks at three short stories by Lavin, namely “Sarah,” “The Nun’s Mother,” and “In the Middle of the Fields.” In “Sarah” the protagonist is constantly surrounded by men and is exposed to the harsh criticism of the public because of her choices to lead her sexual life as she pleases. Here social space is a crucial aspect as it determines the role that Sarah should fulfil. It is simultaneously contrasted with revolt as the main protagonist is still in charge of her sexual powers. “The Nun’s Mother” portrays a woman assessing her life in terms of the society, and questioning the social roles she upholds, especially the newly acquired role of the nun’s mother. It further explores the issues of insufficient communication between mothers and daughters that allegedly influenced the protagonist’s daughter’s decision to become a nun. “In the Middle of the Fields” contrasts the sense of isolation in a vast physical space with the society’s perception of widowhood, mainly the discrepancy between the socioeconomic experiences of widows and widowers. It criticises the stereotypical image woman’s as incapable of handling solitude, associated with the superstition that she needs a constant patronage and care from a man.