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Society and Solitude in Mary Lavin's Short Stories

Společnost a osamění v povídkách Mary Lavinové

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

Vedoucí bakalářské práce (supervisor):
Mgr. Daniela Theinová, Ph.D.

Zpracovala:
Kateryna Trompak

Studijní obor (subject):
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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 the superstition that she needs a constant patronage and care from a man.

Abstrakt

Mary Lavinovou je obtížné jednoduše zařadit v kritickém diskurzu s ohledem na fakt, že po mnoho desetiletí její kategorizace podléhala různým přístupům. Přestože je Mary Lavinová zapsaná na seznam Irských spisovatelů, ve svém díle byla považována za apolitickou, což způsobilo problém jejího „vyloučení“ z Irské literární tradice. Práce Lavinové nebyly v její době vždy považovány za feministické, a v rámci feminismu se setkávaly se smíšenými názory. Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá otázkou zařazení Lavinové v Irském kánonu a významu jejího díla pro feministickou kritiku. Cílem je prokázat, že dílo Lavinové je relevantní z hlediska obou diskurzů díky jejímu realistickému znázornění všeobecných lidských hodnot a problémů Irské střední třídy, jejích tradicí a konvenci, a to zejména s ohledem na problematiku ženství. Toho je dosaženo především prostřednictvím vyobrazení osamělosti primárné ženských postav v sociálním prostředí jejích povídek.I když sociální prostor není kompatibilní s typickým konceptem samoty jako fyzické nepřítomnosti jiných lidí, podstatným tématem povídkách Lavinové jsou stavy sociálního uzavření, jako je mentální osamocení a odcizení se jakožto způsob odstupu od jiných lidí. Hlavním argumentem je skutečnost, že ženské postavy Lavinové neprožívají pouhý pocit osamocení, ale spíše stav emocionálního a mentálního uzavření od sebe samých a společnosti. To je podpořeno represivními sociálními konvencemi a katolickou církví, což vede ke značné propasti mezi jednotlivými ženskými postavami, často je odrazuje komunikovat a podporuje stigma okolo ženství.

Práce blíže zkoumá tři povídky Lavinové, a to „Sarah“, „The Nun’s Mother“, a „In the Middle of the Fields“. V „Sarah“ je hlavní postava konstantně obklopena muži a je vystavena přísné kritice okolí, kvůli jejímu rozhodnutí vést sexuální život, přestože není vdaná. Sociální prostředí zde hraje klíčovou roli, neboť rozhoduje o úloze, kterou Sarah musí plnit. S touto úlohou kontrastuje její vzpoura jakožto osoby, která si řídí svůj sexuální život samostatně. „The Nun’s Mother“ vypovídá o ženě hodnotící svůj život v rámci společnosti a zpochybňující sociální role, jež udržuje. Jedná se zejména o nově nabytou roli matky jeptišky. Dále zkoumá otázku problematické komunikace mezi matkou a dcerou, která údajně ovlivnila dceřino rozhodnutí stát se jeptiškou. „In the Middle of the Fields“ porovnává pocit izolace v rozlehlém fyzickém prostoru se společenským vnímáním vdovství. Zejména nesoulad v socioekonomickém postavení vdov a vdovců. Tato povídka kritizuje stereotyp vůči ženám, jakožto neschopným zvládat samotu, a předsudky o nutnosti stálé mužské záštity a péče.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

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 as an Irish writer. Critics such as Frank O'Connor, A.A. Kelly, Elke D'hoker seem to have been puzzled as to Lavin's categorisation: can she be labelled an Irish writer, a feminist, or both? In her 2013 collection of essays on Mary Lavin, Elke D'hoker — editor and the prominent Lavin's specialist — is persistent in her endeavour to retrieve Lavin's position in literary criticism as a feminist writer as much as an Irish one. She points out the difficulty feminist critics have when it comes to Lavin and her position in the feminist discourse that she has frequently been omitted from women's literary histories or feminist critical studies.[1] She herself states that "Lavin does not fit the stereotype and that her work cannot be located comfortably in the framework of Irish literature in general."[2] D'hoker refers to the possible reason of such a marginal position as "atypicality" of Lavin's work. The referred "atypicality" was phrased by A.A. Kelly as "the impossibility of Lavin to be called a feminist in a regular contemporary sense." Kelly proceeds to state that she is a "quiet rebel"[3] who distributes her attention equally on men and women. Patricia Meszaros concludes that some of Lavin's views, such as those on motherhood or women having a career, "sit uneasily with feminists."[4] However, since the majority of female characters depicted in her stories are middle-class women the question which arises is whether there is a place for Lavin's ordinary women in feminist literary criticism. A lot of the critical attention Lavin seems to get is majorly focused on her proper categorisation and the conflict of her position in the critical discourse, as she indeed does not fit the conventions. One of the questions I will be asking throughout the thesis is how these two properties — feminism and recognisable Irishness — are important for an objective categorisation of Lavin.

While D'hoker tries to fit Lavin into the canon as a feminist Irish writer, she opposes Frank O'Connor's controversial comments on Lavin as not being political and displaying old-fashioned, "Victorian" values,[5] and points to the relevance of both Irish and feminist agenda in

[1] Elke D'hoker, "Beyond the Stereotypes: Mary Lavin's Irish Women," *Irish Studies Review* 16, no.4 (November 2008): 416, https://doi.org/10.1080/09670880802481270.
[2] D'Hoker, "Beyond," 416.
[3] A.A. Kelly, *Mary Lavin: Quiet Rebel* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1980), 171.
[4] Patricia K. Meszaros, "Woman as Artist: The Fiction of Mary Lavin," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 24, no.1 (1982): 39, https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.1982.9937770.
[5] Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2004), chapter 11, Kindle. Throughout the essay O'Connor perpetrates the idea that Lavin's portrayal of Irishness is very confusing and makes remarks on how "every revolution or Renaissance was made by men" and that "women must

her stories. But both "Irishness" and "feminism" require more context to account for their importance in the categorisation of a woman writer from or associated with Ireland. As to "feminism": it might appear that Lavin does not do justice to her female characters in terms of the first- or second-wave feminism (roughly the time Lavin was most productive) as the approach of the age was to portray women who were no longer "silent" or "hidden" but "heroic, passionate and subversive."[6] On the contrary, she explores the mundane lives of the Irish middle-class, and her female characters can hardly be called "heroic." The women in Lavin's stories are often silent — they rarely oppose to patriarchy and for many of them this is not even an issue of acute prominence. Yet she does highlight many important concerns prevalent in Irish society of the time, such as female sexuality, motherhood, the issue of women and solitude, as well as masculinity as a social construct. I propose is that although Lavin may not be a feminist in "a contemporary sense," as defined by Meszaros, Kelly or other prominent scholars, she does contribute to the feminist literary tradition not only by writing about the marginalised middle-class women, but also by displaying the prevalence of such issues in modern societies. To highlight this, I will also work with feminist critics such as Adrienne Rich and Nancy Chodorow, in the subsequent chapters.

During the twentieth century — and particularly its first part — the overwhelming weight of conventions and expectations were appointed onto Irish short story writers as their art was called upon to fulfil the social responsibility of uplifting the Irish nation. Frank O'Connor in his study *The Lonely Voice* discusses this pressure imposed onto the craft of short story writing. According to him, it often leads to the depiction of the society as "the submerged population group," a term he was reluctant to use.[7] He further claims that "always in the short story there is this sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society."[8] D'hoker in her study of the Irish short stories by women writers argues that O'Connor in *The lonely Voice* speaks about the tendencies in Irish short story from a "male bias,"[9] since such protagonists "immediately call up men rather than women."[10] O'Connors misunderstanding of Lavin's focus on the domestic setting in her stories might stem from the fact that her characters are not the

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be left at home." He notes the differences in values men and women have and that Lavin's "Victorian attitude to love" is most likely to be considered old-fashioned, and it seems confusing to him to understand the relevance of domestic setting over the depiction of the issue of Irish problematics.

[6] Mary Eagleton, "Literary Representations of Women," in *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Gill Olain and Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 110.

[7] O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice,* Author's Introduction, Kindle.

[8] O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice*, Author's Introduction, Kindle.

[9] Elke D'hoker, *Irish Women Writers and the Modern Short Story* (Leuven: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 5.

[10] D'hoker, *Irish Women Writers and the Modern Short Story, 5.*

obvious outsiders that analyse the society from the outside, but rather the active members of the Irish middle-class. He also feigns to criticise Lavin for the lack of Irish political context in her works. By this he unintentionally implies that to be qualified as Irish the short story writer has to voice the national matters of Ireland.

However, Lavin – possibly also due to the fact that she was brought up in America before moving back to Ireland – has a different perspective on both Irishness and nationality. She is an outsider in the country, and perhaps that is the reason of her not being overtly political. The "Irishness" of Lavin's stories, the one identifiable with the political and cultural aspects, in my opinion, should not be the primary feature when it comes to classifying Lavin. Even though the setting of the stories is in Ireland, in combination with the feminist issues mentioned above they evoke the quality of universality in her work. I propose to look at it as a backdrop for her stories which creates an emotionally constrictive environment and highlights the power of the religious and social institutions, as well as facilitates suitable conditions for exploring the Western society in general. Her stories rarely openly comment on Irish politics, contrarily to the expectations of the age, except for the story "The Patriot Son,"[11] as O'Connor has argued.[12]

By shifting the focus away from the Irish aspect as the defining factor of Lavin's work I want to emphasise a different perspective on the Irish society that can be also applied for the criticism of a society on a more general level. In other words, the features of exclusivity and the depiction of a marginalised community often attributed to the Irish society are less important for the analysis of her works. Thus, it creates new space for universal values. It is not to say that Lavin does not display traits inherent to Irish culture, or that the latter should be neglected as a relevant context for many of her works, but rather that her stories by depicting the lives of the middle-class provide grounds to explore issues that feminism tackled throughout the twentieth century worldwide. My aim is to see beyond the context of Irishness and to prove that Lavin achieves much more in her work — universal relevance. It is something that critics demand of every writer, but Lavin's achievement in this respect is exceptional. In her works she allowed her characters to depict battles that societies across the world undergo — the middle-class of the Western civilisation set in a "small town" mentality which surpasses the limits of Irishness and undermines its specificity, thus allowing the Irish to relate to the outer

[11] Mary Lavin "The Patriot Son," *The Georgia Review* 20, no. 3 (1966): 301-17, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41396280.
This story described two young men, Sean and Matty, who differ in their political views: Sean is an active revolutionary, whilst Matty is confused what to make out of it, and in the end, he helps Sean to escape his enemies, but gets ridiculed for it.

[12] O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice,* chap. 11, Kindle.

world. The combination of these three major factors — Irishness, feminism, and universality — makes Lavin an exceptional writer and enables her to address issues that are prominent in all three contexts.

Nonetheless, Lavin's stories are very diverse in what they are trying to transmit; her focus cannot be described as limited to women, despite them being the most regular protagonists. Ingman denotes that "the author's sympathies are divided equally between men and women,"[13] and thus to characterise Lavin as a writer with only a female-oriented agenda would be misleading as well. My primary focus will remain with her female characters, but I will also look at the male characters according to their relevance for the discussion. It is important to remember that Lavin wrote about feminist issues concerning both men and women. And to return to O'Connor and D'hoker, and many others, they are trying to attain the impossible when categorising Lavin's work: her themes are simply too universal to be designated to these two contexts only.

As mentioned above, the lack of nationalistic focus has been previously described in Lavin as "un-Irish." However, Patrick Lonergan identifies three important branches of Irish short fiction, one of which is cosmopolitan as in "transcending national boundaries."[14] As D'hoker aptly notes by countering the realistic and nationalistic bias of the Irish short story, the tradition is open to a wider variety of authors that includes authors like Lavin.[15] Whilst both feminist and Irish aspects of her writings are important for subsequent analysis of her work, the mere nationality-oriented categorisation would rely on the idea of the exclusivity of the Irish nation.

The ambiguous attitude that Lavin shows towards the political and national matters of Ireland is often perceived as covert, but intentional in her stories. Yet, what seems to be her primary focus are the mundane lives of the middle-class within the Irish context. This suggests that her stories cannot and should not be studied in terms of national context only. The historical factors concerning the Irish middle-class are there primarily to create a backdrop against which she could explore universal human traits of female sexuality, issues of masculinity, the mother-daughter relationship, widowhood, motherhood, and others. The one binding aspect that seems to connect many of these topics throughout the stories is the notion of solitude. An important aspect coinciding with the notion of solitude is the setting in a domestic environment, portraying

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[13] Heather Ingman, "Masculinities in Mary Lavin's Short stories" in *Mary Lavin*, ed. Elke D'hoker (Sallins: Irish Academic Press, 2013), 30.
[14] Patrick Lonergan, "Irish Short Fiction: 1880-1945" in *A Companion to the British and Irish Short Story*, ed. Cheryl Alexander Malcolm and David Malcolm (West Sussex: Willey-Blackwell Publication, 2008), 63.
[15] D'hoker, *Irish Women Writers and the Modern Short Story,* 7.

often old-fashioned, "Victorian" values still prevalent in Irish society of the time. This is not to be taken as an indicator of Lavin's unprogressive views on life, but as apparatus to address the problematics of complex interpersonal relationships among people of the Irish middle-class.

D'hoker assesses the dominance of domesticity in Irish women writers as "the means to dramatize the difficulty of interpersonal relations or the need for human connection", not "to idealize a romantic outsider or promote a sense of universal loneliness."[16] However, the so-called "universal loneliness" is a feature many can identify in Lavin's stories, especially if we are to follow O'Connor's summary of the characteristic features of short stories. But the term "universal loneliness" is quite ambiguous: as put by Philip Koch in his philosophical study on solitude, loneliness expresses a feeling rather than a state.[17] My 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. As Koch states "something very much like these desires, bodily feelings, attentions, and evaluations — unified and interactive — make up the emotion of loneliness. Solitude, however, is not an emotion."[18]

He also delineates that solitude can be associated with both pleasant and painful feelings, whereas loneliness is intrinsically painful.[19] Within the scope of Lavin's female characters solitude is a state many of them experience whilst being somehow defined by the borders of their social space. Society plays a significant part in imposing the state of solitude and its impact on the female characters, as not only does it define the weight and scale of conventions on those women, but it also underlines the prominence of this state in women's lives despite the fact that women and solitude is often perceived negatively. Solitude as a theoretical concept has been customarily associated with male characters, especially during the Romantic period.[20] Koch claims that the idea that has been prevalent in Western culture is that solitude is not valuable for women because it has always been a male prerogative, whereas solitude in a woman was thought to be "unnatural and dangerous."[21]

In terms of the study of short story Frank O'Connor himself named his critical work *A Lonely Voice* claiming that "the most characteristic something of a short story" is "an intense

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[16] D'hoker, *Short Story*, 7.
[17] Philip Koch, *Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter* (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court Printing, 1997), 41.
[18] Koch, *Solitude*, 43.
[19] Koch, *Solitude*, 43.
[20] "The standard account of literary loneliness has focused on the idealized figure of the melancholy male solitary and his growing tendency to symbolize a new kind of emotional, intellectual and aesthetic isolation." Amelia Worsley, "A Poetry of Loneliness from Romance to Romanticism" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2014), 3.
[21] Koch, *Solitude*, 253.

awareness of human loneliness."[22] He introduces three types of a protagonist: the lonely voice, the submerged population group, and the outsider.[23] Significantly, all of these types of solitude are presented as traits associated customarily with men. D'hoker criticises O'Connor's approach to the craft of the short story stating that the preoccupation with a protagonist who illustrates the fate of a "lonely outsider" or a "romantic anti-hero" limits the representation of Ireland to "a marginalized submerged population group" rather than diverse community of individuals.[24] Also, such an approach allows for women, who were often overlooked, to be accepted as protagonists in short stories, as they were often limited in terms of space. Women were rarely allowed to be physically alone as for many of them it represented danger. Some companionship was always advisable, but it was also inevitable since women were expected to take care of children alone, whilst their husbands were at work. So, for many of them solitude was an unachievable state. It is important to note in this context the long line of brave and subversive female protagonists who ventured into the world alone, exploring its options, such as Mary Lavelle of Kate O'Brien, Miriam Henderson of Dorothy M. Richardson, the country girls of Edna O'Brien and many others.

But again, the question suggested above imposes itself: where is the place for ordinary middle-class women in the feminist discourse? Lavin's female characters are often enclosed in their limited social space, they are missing the emotional connection, the reciprocity of human exchange. Many are unable to communicate their needs or concerns even to the closest people in their surroundings, others are incapable of expressing or understanding their sexuality. The specificities of the Irish historical context are relevant as well, with the repressions of the Catholic Church and conservative middle-class conventions, the expectations projected onto women were immensely hard and traumatising. Lavin, however, approaches the concept of patriarchal repression in a different way. Instead of depicting women who fight against the patriarchy, try to escape their life situations, and stand up to the societal expectations, she mostly depicts women who do not rise above their circumstances, as a result of the lack of purpose or opportunity. These women are quite ordinary in terms of their social and family roles typical of mothers, daughters, or widows.

But they are very diverse as well, atypically portrayed in some cases as dominant "masculine" as well as juxtaposed to "feminine men."[25] Although the domestic setting

[22] O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice*, Introduction, Kindle.
[23] O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice*, Introduction, Kindle.
[24] D'hoker, *Short Story*, 4.
[25] Kelly, *Quiet Rebel*, 75.

portraying ordinary women and their mundane encounters may not be typically feminist, it certainly points to women who are often overlooked and marginalised in every sense. In my view, Mary Lavin does justice to them by voicing their ordeals and the issues that concern these women who are no obvious heroes and yet are as valid and complex as anyone else. In the upcoming three chapters I will argue that Mary Lavin's writings contain various elements of social and feminist criticism, as well as depict many universal human values, illustrating my point on the author's three short stories, "Sarah," "The Nun's Mother," and "In the Middle of the Fields" and by way of exploring a binding feature that unites her female characters: solitude.

When it comes to the three stories mentioned above, they all illustrate a different, rather unexpected, type of solitude — the solitude of the mind. Philip Koch uses the term of "disengagement" which in my view is very fitting for describing these manifestations of solitude. He explains that solitude is "consciousness disengaged from other people" and that "disengagement from people does not entail awareness of being disengaged,"[26] which is very important when looking at the three main protagonists from Lavin's stories: Sarah, Maud and Vera. All three of them are set in the boundaries of a social space, always defined by their relationship to men — mother, sister, wife, or widow. Their solitude, or disengagement, does not reside in the physical absence of other people, as all three of them are constantly surrounded by their family members or other members of the closest society, but in the fact that they are unable to communicate and share their anxieties even with the closest ones under the undeniable weight of middle-class conventions.

Another valid term to look at is "social disengagement" typically used in psychology, in the theory of ageing. Prominent scholars in this field, Elaine Cumming and William E. Henry, suggest that "ageing is an inevitable, mutual withdrawal or disengagement, resulting in decreased interaction between the ageing person and others in the social system he belongs to."[27] I propose to use this term not only as a criteria for older people, but for the society at large. The term "social disengagement" is relevant for Lavin's stories as it delineates the state of disengagement that Koch speaks about, but as enclosed in the social space. Such perspective allows to explore the mental withdrawal of the female characters mentioned above from the society.

I would like to use the concept "social disengagement" as an umbrella term for such states as alienation, isolation, and mental solitude that will be discussed in the following

[26] Koch, *Solitude*, 58.
[27] Elaine Cumming and William E. Henry, *Growing Old: The Process of Disengagement* (New York: Basic Books, 1961), 227.

chapters. All of these concepts are often difficult to define within the society and its space, and that is why, in my opinion, the term "social disengagement" allows for a more precise analysis of Lavin's stories. One of the most prominent state exemplified in the three stories is "alienation." Robert Weiss defines it as "the social or psychological estrangement of an individual from an activity or social form with which they are at least nominally associated."[28] For example, Maud from "The Nun's Mother" is estranged in her role as a mother and wife, the widow from "In the Middle of the Fields" is estranged from her position of a wife, and Sarah is estranged from the society in general as a price for her sexual freedom. The moment of alienation for these three women always occurs in terms of social space.

Robert Sayre in *Solitude and Society* affirms that solitude is a radical fragmentation that causes the isolation of each individual within the social framework,[29] which brings me to the second concept relevant to the study of solitude in Lavin's short stories: the social space. According to Henri Lefebvre "social space is produced as humans produce their own life, their own consciousness, their own world."[30] 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 is the mental loneliness and alienation used as a way of detachment of oneself from other human beings. When examining the three female characters mentioned above — Sarah, Maud, and Vera — social space can be approached from several perspectives.

The first is the conventional idea that a woman needs the company of a man, be it her husband or other member of the family, or even a neighbour, that can be noted in each story. The juxtaposition of singleness and social space determines that in the public eye a woman cannot be alone. As cited above, the association of solitude and women has always had negative connotations. Lefebvre claims that "in social space, diversity may be simulated, and a travesty of enlightenment and intelligibility ensconced under the sign of transparency,"[31] which does not entail that diversity in its true form is an acceptable phenomenon. Lefebvre describes society as "creating its own trap": the dominant conventions of what is an "acceptable" social life create the false image of transparency. This can be seen in "The Nun's Mother" where Maud, a mother, and a wife, assess her life in terms of the society, and criticises those social roles that she already upholds, and the one that she has just obtained — the nun's mother. Contrarily, "In the Middle of the Fields" contrasts the physical isolation of the vast space around the farm and the society's

[28] Robert Weiss, *Loneliness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1974), 4, cited in Philip Koch, 51.
[29] Robert Sayre, *Solitude in Society* (Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2014) 200, cited in Philip Koch, 54.
[30] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), 68.
[31] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 76.

perception of widowhood. The contrast between the notions of a widow and a widower exemplify the convention that a woman cannot handle solitude, because she needs a constant patronage and care from a man. “Sarah” approaches the concept of space from a completely different perspective — the main protagonist is constantly surrounded by men and is exposed to the harsh criticism of the public.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore various states of social disengagement, such as alienation, isolation, and mental solitude from various social perspectives proposed in the three stories mentioned above, and to prove that Lavin incorporates the three aspects I find most notable to her: feminist, recognisable Irishness, and universality. “Sarah” offers an insight into the position of a social outcast who does not fit into the social structure. Contrarily, “The Nun’s Mother” allows to explore these issues through the lens of a stigmatised mother-daughter relationship between women of a respectable household. “In the Middle of the Fields” looks at social disengagement through the prism of widowhood that in social perspective negates woman’s capability of success and happiness by existing alone in a vast physical space. All three stories illustrate the contrast between social space and solitude and provide plentiful examples to examine the instances of social disengagement the characters express as well as the notions of social space and its conventions in Western societies.

CHAPTER 2: "Sarah"

Introductory Remarks

The first story I would like to concentrate on is "Sarah," printed in the acclaimed 1943 collection *Tales from Bective Bridge*[32]. This story follows Sarah, the main protagonist, who lives with her two brothers and three sons, all of whom she had as a single mother. She is known in her community as a social outcast, but as a hard-working Catholic. She is hired by Kathleen Kedrigan, the wife to Oliver Kedrigan, to help around the house whilst she is gone to Dublin. The story ends with Sarah's fourth pregnancy, allegedly from Oliver Kedrigan, which leads to several unfortunate events that result in Sarah's death. In the *Introduction* I claim this story to be relevant for the theme of solitude and its significance for feminist and Irish literary criticism. While the former factor is most evident in the depiction of Sarah's estrangement from her society, as a price for her sexual life, the latter follows from Lavin's criticism of social conventions.

This chapter focuses on three of the main aspects of social disengagement and its impact explored in this thesis. Firstly, the conditions of alienation and isolation the main protagonist experiences which are the punishment she receives for her life choices. Secondly, the negative effects disengagement has on the communication amongst characters and discourages people like Sarah from reaching out to the community. And lastly, the state of mental solitude that is reinforced by prejudices and stereotypes amongst characters. This chapter's secondary focus will also be on Sarah's position as an outcast in connection with the notion of the "freedom of choice." The "freedom" or "free will" that the protagonist appears to enact suggests a possible contrasting interpretation, which is that Sarah's rebellion also serves as her entrapment. The chapter considers the duality between Sarah and Kathleen that represents the alleged discrepancy between different modes of femininity. This resides in Kathleen's description as the exemplary wife who abides the laws of society, whilst Sarah is depicted as "flawed" in that respect since she rebels against them. It results in the dehumanisation of women who do not comply with prevalent notions of social propriety. Finally, this chapter will examine the manifestations of solitude induced by social conventions that are also responsible for stigmatising womanhood as such.

[32] I would like to note that throughout the thesis I will be working with the original versions of the stories not their subsequent revised versions.

Here it is important to highlight the relevance of the Irish context of the time and the influence of the Catholic Church. Caitríona Beaumont claims that many Irish historians (such as John Whyte, Catherine Rose, Liam O'Dowd) regard "Catholic ideology, economic austerity and traditional attitudes regarding women's role [to have been] responsible for the continuing discrimination against women" in Ireland.[33] Beaumont claims this to be relevant for the period of the Irish free state, specifically 1922-1948. Even though Lavin's story does not deal with these issues directly, their long-term impact is visible in various gender stereotypes reflected in her depiction of female and male characters. Lavin also criticises the outdated values and prudishness that Ireland at the time seemed to be promoting and emphasises the dominant and stifling role of patriarchy in Ireland and Western cultures in general. Beaumont further claims that "there was particular emphasis placed on the need for high ideals and moral virtue amongst the young, especially young women,"[34] which supports the importance of feminist perspectives in relation to this short story. "Sarah" portrays ordinary middle-class women who, despite having to live up to the restricting ideals of conventional womanhood, were capable of making their own decisions within the limits of Irish society. Lavin underlines the battles women had to fight on daily basis to preserve their identities.

"Sarah had a bit of a bad name": conditions of alienation and isolation

Philip Koch in his study on solitude claims alienation to be "intrinsically an unpleasant condition"[35] which involves "a fracture of relationship with another who is yet felt as part of experience."[36] He also makes a relevant point about isolation claiming that "the feeling of isolation would be the experiential sense that one was separated from other people."[37] These two states of alienation and isolation are something that Sarah experiences on a regular basis. Margaret Church states that Lavin is "consistently interested in the fate of the outsider in society"[38] and this is well apparent in her painting of Sarah as a social outcast. As Anne Fogarty notes, Lavin "unceremoniously announces"[39] intimate details about the character in the opening

[33] Caitríona Beaumont, "Women, Citizenship and Catholicism in the Irish Free State, 1922-1948," *Women's History Review* 6, no.4 (1997): 564. https://doi.org/10.1080/09612029700200154.
[34] Beaumont, "Women, Citizenship and Catholicism," 566.
[35] Philip Koch, "Chapter 2: Near relations: Loneliness, Isolation, Privacy, Alienation," *Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter* (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court Printing, 1997), 53.
[36] Koch, "Near Relations," 53.
[37] Koch, "Dimensions," 44.
[38] Margaret Church, "Social Consciousness in their Works of Elizabeth Bowen, Iris Murdoch and Mary Lavin," *College Literature* 7, no. 2 (Spring 1980): 162. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25111327.
[39] Anne Fogarty, "Discontinuities: *Tales from Bective Bridge* and the Modernist Short Story," *Mary Lavin,* ed. Elke D'hoker (Sallis: Irish Academic Press, 2013), 59.

paragraph, thus making the story very open to sexuality from the beginning. "Sarah had a bit of a bad name"[40] writes Lavin about the main protagonist, who is known in the community to have "the three strapping sons she'd borne — all out of wedlock."[41] Being so extraordinary in her environment, Sarah is completely alone: she does not have a friend, or a family member from whom she could seek help and support, and this is one of the defining factors that lead to her tragic death. The condition of isolation that she experiences is a direct result of the societal conventions and stereotypes that stigmatise Sarah who does not fit within their limits. They undermine her entitlement to reciprocal human relationships. Church asserts that by criticising such conventions in her stories, Lavin urges the reader to reassess their relationships to others "in order to establish real bridges of communication to replace stereotypes."[42] Sarah's life choices are directly connected with her state of isolation, since it is the price she pays for her sexual life.

Many critics associate Sarah's behaviour with the quality of "sexual freedom," or as Fogarty characterises it, "the empowered actions of the heroine."[43] Eloísa Dall'Bello and Beatriz Kopschitz Bastos claim that "Sarah has no other means to find her own way to empowerment than subverting such idealistic and utopian views on women in her private life, which she manifests through her sexual freedom."[44] In the opening paragraph of the story, Lavin ironically exposes the hypocrisy of the values promoted by the Catholic Church stating that Sarah led a rather exemplary life as a Catholic, which made it easier for her neighbours to tolerate her "sins": there was a "greater understanding in their hearts for sins against God than for sins against his Holy Church."[45] According to these critics, the hostility that Sarah experiences from her community is not due to her pregnancies, which are the visible proof of her unsanctified sex life, but is part of the systematic condemnation of human individuality and independent decision-making.

In her social environment that maintains a certain set of values and ideals, her unique behaviour contradicts the presumption about women only being able to exist in relationships with men. Philip Koch explains that "in a woman a passion for solitude has been thought

[40] Lavin, "Sarah," *Tales from Bective Bridge* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012), 43.
[41] Lavin, "Sarah," 43.
[42] Church, "Social Consciousness," 161.
[43] Fogarty, "Discontinuities," 60.
[44] Eloísa Dall'Belo and Beatriz Kopschitz Bastos, "Subverting the Ideal of Womanhood: Mary Lavin's "Sarah" and Female Agency," *Mapping Critical Journeys in Literature, Film, and Critical Studies* 72, no. 1 (2019): 47. http://dx.doi.org/10.5007/2175-8026.2019v72n1p41
[45] Lavin, "Sarah," 43.

unnatural and dangerous […] and frightening as a witch."[46] Indeed the women in Sarah's community claim that "she has a queer way of looking at a man,"[47] as if crediting her with magical powers that can enchant men. Sarah represents danger to the other women not only because she questions the conventional image of a "righteous lady," but also because she can challenge, as Lavin puts it, "the legitimate power"[48] of these ladies over their men.

However, there are two sides to Sarah's "sexual freedom," as it also contributes to her own entrapment and presents her character with a new possible reading. On the one hand, she can be seen as a rebel who exposes the hypocrisy of her conventional community, on the other hand, she is a victim of her own limitations and the society's stereotypes. By seducing those men, she confirms the woman's role as a sexual object. The reason behind this repetitive behaviour is not so much her "free will," but more likely her loneliness and need for affection. Her advances to men seem to be conscious and even give an impression of her playing a game with them: "Sarah stared after him, keeping her eyes on him until the cart was like a toy cart in the distance, with a toy horse under it, and Oliver himself a toy farmer made out of painted wood."[49] However, her desire to be liked by men acts to her disadvantage, and seems to be her weakness. Sarah's actions emphasise the negative impact that the states of alienation and isolation have had on her.

Moreover, as much as Sarah opposes the ideal of a woman available to her, she still plays the traditional role of a wife at her brother's household. The fact that she is able to escape the institution of marriage in order to express her sexuality still does not allow her to escape the social and economical patterns women were forced into when left without male guardianship. When discussing the conditions of isolation in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Koch writes that "the qualities of his experiences in isolation were largely determined by the success and failures in the saga of economic independence and self-reliance." [50] Even though this observation does not refer to the masculine and feminine dynamism in the society, it is relevant when discussing Sarah's economic situation in the community.

From this perspective she experiences the state of isolation from its negative side, as her earnings go to support her children which robs her of self-sufficiency. "There must be a woman in the house,"[51] state her brothers who exploit Sarah to fulfil the stereotypical role of a wife.

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[46] Philip Koch, "Women and Solitude," 253.
[47] Lavin, "Sarah," 44.
[48] Lavin, "Sarah," 44.
[49] Lavin, "Sarah," 45.
[50] Koch, "Dimensions," 45.
[51] Lavin, "Sarah," 46.

Lavin has been previously criticised by Frank O'Connor for portraying outdated values in her stories which he refers to as "Victorian values."[52] But Sarah is a perfect manifestation of old-fashioned conventions prevalent in Ireland of Lavin's time. Koch expounds that "slave to nursery or servant of the chief appear to have been the options available to the Victorian wife."[53] Undoubtedly Lavin did not write about Victorian women, but the reference to the Victorian values that O'Connor has previously referred to in Lavin's writing is more likely to have been applied ironically and serve for criticising these stereotypes rather than promoting them.

So, what on the one hand seems to be an expression of Sarah's freedom becomes also her own self-deception resulting in her estrangement from society. But alongside this kind of isolation, a condition of mental solitude also seems to be her primary experience. The story is full of gaps and hints and it is evident that the narrator does not say much about what Sarah feels or thinks. Lavin's protagonist only utters several sentences throughout the story which supports the sense of her complete alienation from the world. We never know what she thinks. The image of "a little green velvet box stuck all over with pearly shells,"[54] that her brother Pat throws out from the house along with her other belongings, is the only intimate detail we know about her. It is evident that this box is very important to Sarah and seems to be her only material property. The narrative does elaborate on this detail further, but the shells can also be understood as emblematic of the rare, superficial details that Lavin intentionally gives us about the protagonist.

Sarah does meet the expectations imposed onto her by the society, because her sexual liberties are tolerated if she abides the Catholic conventions of what a role of a woman is: a mother, a wife (which equals that of a servant) and a devoted Catholic. The only issue with Sarah, in the society's eyes, is the absence of social protection that is acquired in marriage. So to say unambiguously that Sarah's expression of sexuality is the example of "sexual freedom" or "free will" is to disregard the gruesome fact that a woman has always been defined in terms of her status towards a man socially and economically. It would also undermine the extreme consequences that usually affected women who decided to act within their sexual freedom. "The priest said a Home was the only place for the like of her,"[55] remarks one of the characters. As Dall'Bello and Bastos explain, this "is a clear reference to Magdalene Laundries — houses

[52] Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2004), chapter 11, Kindle. More in the *Introduction*, footnote n. 5.
[53] Koch, "Women and Solitude," 258.
[54] Lavin, "Sarah," 50.
[55] Lavin, "Sarah," 46.

maintained by the Catholic Church"[56] in which women who gave birth out of marriage were sent to slave labour for a number of years as the price for their transgression. Thus we could conclude that the instances of whatever restricted independence portrayed in "Sarah" were not perceived as signs of a strong will by her community, but as the results of a "weak mind."

Such attitudes towards female sexuality highlight the superficial approach to this issue which allows society to dehumanise women and reduce them to their mere stereotypical functions through manipulating their lives with conventions. Sarah's sexual life can also be read as a revenge that she wishes to take on her society for constricting her nature. Henri Lefebvre in his study on social space warns against the situation where "social conventions become fetishised and so become more real than the reality itself."[57] The society Sarah lives in represents, as Dall'Bello and Bastos claim, "the cult of the Virgin Mary" and it perpetrates "the ideal of motherhood, moral behavior and purity […] a role model that the 'ideal' Irish woman must conform with."[58] Sarah's sexual life does not go against nature, as there is nothing wrong or right about it, but it goes against the construct of the marital institution that patriarchal Western society invented to control its people. The misfortune of being a woman in such an environment is the physical manifestation of pregnancy that becomes an evidence of the "sin." Sarah's pregnancies are a natural consequence of sex, and as Lefebvre aptly notes, "nature does not seek to deceive."[59] Rather, the deceit derives from her own society that deprives her of her liberties. What is evident in this story is not a mere example of "sexual freedom," but a much more complex issue of a power battle between the patriarchal society and Sarah who through her contradicting actions exposes the hypocrisy and superficial morality that the Irish middle-class exemplifies.

[56] Dall'Bello and Bastos, "Subverting the Ideal," 47.
[57] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), 68.
[58] Dall'Bello and Bastos, "Subverting the Ideal," 43.
[59] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 81.

Social roles and the impacts of social disengagement

The term "social disengagement" is not to be mistaken for the one used in the theory of ageing.[60] Rather, I use it in connection to Koch's thoughts on disengagement. He claims that "disengagement from other people does not entail awareness of being disengaged."[61] In my interpretation, "social disengagement" does not refer to an individual's withdrawal from society, but an individual's withdrawal within the society. It implies that a person can perform their social role well, but still be disengaged from their individual needs and others through the lack of communication. As I have mentioned in the *Introduction*, the term "social disengagement" entails three constitutive aspects: the conditions of alienation, isolation and mental solitude.

The other female character in this short story that needs to be analysed in detail is Kathleen Kedrigan who functions as a foil for Sarah. She is the wife of Oliver Kedrigan and hires Sarah for three days to look after the house whilst she is away in Dublin. There is a stark contrast between the "alienated outcast" Sarah, and the "perfect" Mrs. Kedrigan: both experience pregnancy later on in the story, but their attitude to sex and their physical condition during pregnancy is completely different; both are influenced by the society and make choices to either go with or against it. They are the antipodes of each other — for Sarah pregnancy is, surprisingly, something she desired, whilst for Kathleen it seems to be part of a duty. Richard F. Peterson claims that while the two women are "both pregnant by Oliver, they represent the emotional extremes of womanhood."[62] He expounds:

> Kathleen, though anemic and afraid of life, is the publicly respectable wife, deriving a perverse strength from public opinion and her own moral self-righteousness. Sarah, though condemned by the community and her family, is the natural lover, always seeking warm and intimate relationship with life. Sarah's death [..] represents a triumph for the community, but it is the triumph of the unnatural over natural.[63]

In this interpretation, Sarah is the character that through pregnancy connects with her needs for affection. Her motherly instinct allows her to experience, though only partly, the reciprocity of human exchange she seeks. Lavin writes: "[s]he carried the child deep in her body and she boldly faced an abashed congregation at Mass on Sundays."[64] As I have suggested, the contrast between the two women is highlighted even in the description of their physical state: Sarah is

[60] Disengagement theory of ageing explores how older adults cope with ageing and researches the reason behind their (seemingly) voluntary withdrawal from society.
[61] Koch, "Disengagement," 58.
[62] Richard F. Peterson, *Mary Lavin* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), 30.
[63] Peterson, *Mary Lavin*, 30.
[64] Lavin, "Sarah," 48.

energetic, healthy, able to work as diligently as before, whilst Kathleen had troubles to get pregnant in the first place, and experiences physical fatigue.

"The next evening Sarah was sitting by the fire as Kathleen Kedrigan had been sitting by hers."[65] Despite so many factors that bind them together, Kathleen and Sarah never speak with each other. They are portrayed as rivals who compete for one man, which perpetrates an essentially misogynistic view about women's relationships with each other. The blame is always placed on women in order to highlight the necessity for conventions that are the pillars of propriety in the middle-class society. Even though the two women go through the same physical experience and transformation, they are both alone in their ultimately female experience of womanhood, because of the taboo on communication among women on topics relating to their bodies and minds. Due to her socially and economically secure position represented by her marriage to Oliver, Kathleen allows herself to distinguish between "worthy" and "unworthy" people. Her middle-class conventionality exemplifies the dehumanisation of independent-minded women such as Sarah.

Donna L. Potts states that "Kathleen Kedrigan has clearly internalised the patriarchal double standard for women"[66] in being portrayed as someone who benefits from the patriarchy and allowing her morality to be corrupted by the fetishised ideals promoted by the society. As said above, in Ireland, female sexuality was rigidly controlled by the Catholic Church, which was a helpful tool to exercise patriarchal control. Fogarty claims that Oliver is attracted to Sarah's "ambiguous animal sexuality"[67] in contrast to his wife's lack of vitality. "Did you rub sheepraddle into your cheeks?"[68] asks Oliver of Sarah, while Kathleen in the end refers to the protagonist dismissively as being "dead as a rat."[69] Statements like these allude to the aspect of animality that is associated with Sarah. Kathleen, instead of questioning the faithfulness of her husband, decides to take revenge on Sarah without even giving her a chance to explain her version of the events. Mrs. Kedrigan discards Sarah as the elevated position of a respectable wife gives her the power to dismiss such women who do not fit the stereotype, and who represent danger over the "legitimate power over her man."[70]

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[65] Lavin, "Sarah," 49.
[66] Donna L. Potts, "Reviving the Lass of Aughrim: Mary Lavin's 'Sarah'," *Celtic Cultural Studies: An Interdisciplinary Online Journal 6* (2007): n. pag. Cited in Dall'Bello and Bastos, 48.
[67] Fogarty, "Discontinuities," 59.
[68] Lavin, "Sarah," 45.
[69] Lavin, "Sarah," 52.
[70] Lavin, "Sarah," 44.

Other characters worth inspecting are the men of the story: Oliver Kedrigan, Kathleen's husband, and Pat and Joseph, Sarah's elder brothers. The three men serve as another medium for Lavin to expose the hypocrisy of social roles. Heather Ingman affirms that in the Irish context "men are pressurized into performing masculinity in particular ways in line with their culture's expectations."[71] The brothers' role in Sarah's fate is very much stereotypical. At first, they exploit her as their domestic slave, and later they cruelly banish her from the house. The two characters are also disengaged from their personal morality, which is implied in Joseph's hesitant benevolence towards his sister. The only value system that they accept is the one asserted by the society, which can be traced to the act of Kathleen giving the letter to Sarah's brothers. This act is symbolic since it shows that Kathleen represents an exemplary member of the society. Due to her social status, her authority is stronger than that of Pat and Joseph, despite them being men. Elke D'hoker argues that the brothers were enlightened of this matter only due to Kathleen, and now when the matter is a public knowledge the eldest brother feels compelled to publicly defend the family name, and he roughly throws Sarah out of the house, causing her death and that of her child."[72]

Even though Joseph obviously does not agree with Pat's judgement, his silence has the same effect as his brother's outspoken harshness towards Sarah. The brothers are portrayed as acting in the frames of their social roles but disconnected from asserting their personal beliefs that do not comply with the public opinion. Oliver Kedrigan is not less guilty of Sarah's death than her two brothers or his wife. His role is that of an exemplary husband, and a decent member of the community. Furthermore, if the paternity of Sarah's child can be traced back to him, then he should have been viewed as guilty of adultery. Yet his social position secures him from any possible criticism. Ingman narrows down the role of man to a "masculine ability to safeguard the purity of their women" and considers it "a crucial aspect of Irish nationalism."[73] To summarise, social disengagement is manifested through prioritising the social value system over the personal one, and the individual judgements of the members of society.

[71] Heather Ingman, "Masculinities in Mary Lavin's Short Stories," *Mary Lavin*, 32.
[72] Elke D'hoker, "Family and Community in Mary Lavin's Grimes Stories," *Mary Lavin*, , 163.
[73] Ingman, "Masculinities in Mary Lavin's Short Stories," 35.

Mental solitude and social space: Kathleen and Sarah reconsidered

According to Lefebvre, "any space implies, contains and dissimulates social relationships."[74] In conservative Catholic Ireland Kathleen and Sarah are determined by such an environment while each of them also chooses her own path. Throughout the story the necessity of communication is never voiced by any of the characters. The term "mental solitude" aims to emphasise this common state of the main characters induced by the social system of their community. Each character is mentally isolated and her mind acts as the only subjective medium through which she can analyse the world around. Sarah saw it as repressive and so rebelled against it, whilst Kathleen decided to continue to benefit from the system. It is easy to condemn the latter for her attitude towards Sarah, and there is a sufficient amount of evidence that Lavin depicted her as a woman who profits from the patriarchal structure, thus supporting the stereotypes imposed onto women. But it is important to remember that whilst each person should be held accountable for their actions, Kathleen's character has also been shaped by the society that she lives in, and there is a possibility that her bias towards Sarah is unconscious. As the narrative is presented to us as a patchwork of individual events, Lavin tricks her readers by making them assume things about the characters, just as much as they assume things about each other. This highlights the condition of mental solitude within the society that supports those channels of communication it deems appropriate and stigmatises those that are not.

The absence of communication between the two women is rigidly controlled by social standards and promotes alienation among people. A.A. Kelly suggests that "ironically treated characters wrap themselves in a blanket of pretence, at best acting out of habit because they have not thought out the reasons for their behaviour."[75] A woman in such a society had to rely on herself. It is likely that neither Sarah nor Kathleen had the possibility to express their feelings out loud without being condemned, and so both of them are examples of the mental solitude that so dramatically influenced Sarah's fate. Perhaps, if it were normal to encourage conversations among people who dealt with natural, intimate feelings, the societal constructs would not have had such power. But as Lefebvre states, "nature presents itself as it is, now cruel, now generous. It does not seek to deceive; it may reserve many an unpleasant surprise for us, but it never lies."[76] In the society's eyes, however, this is a threat to the perfectionist set of ideals that do not allow for any exceptions. Dall'Bello and Bastos depict Irish middle-class

[74] Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 82-83.
[75] A.A. Kelly, *Quiet Rebel* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press,1980), 111.
[76] Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 81.

society as possessed with "the ideal of motherhood, moral behaviour and purity it represented."[77] In the eyes of such a society, Sarah has to be rejected as the representation of an "unnatural" evil. In this light, mental solitude represents a negative trait in these characters which promotes the stigma surrounding any female behaviour not in line with social standards.

Concluding Remarks

In opposition to Peterson's idea that "the characters are rarely more than one-dimensional"[78] in this short story, I argue that Mary Lavin's "Sarah" allows us to closely examine the intricate relationships that take place behind the closed doors of respectable households and exposes the hypocrisy of the Catholic ideal of virtue and self-righteousness. The three main issues this chapter has dealt with — Sarah's alienation and isolation, the relationships between male and female characters that promote social disengagement, and their mental solitude as its direct result — are interconnected and exist in a shared environment. The female characters are shaped by the social conventions that influence their choice either to abide them, or to rebel against them. But they also exemplify the perpetrated stigma and dehumanisation of womanhood: Sarah and Kathleen function in a nonreciprocal relationship, and instead of benefiting from each other's experience of the female body, the socially advanced character (Kathleen) disposes of the outcast (Sarah).

Social structure is a very important tool for the Western societies, as it distributes the titles of "worthiness" amongst its residents and justifies the dehumanisation of those who do not conform. Heather Ingman claims that "hierarchies among the classes become all the more important to maintain since the shopkeepers and small farmers are aware that they are only one step away from the servant and labouring classes,"[79] and supports the idea that dynamics between characters are influenced primarily by the social structures. The dichotomy between the two women portrays different expressions of femininity: one is socially accepted, and thus seen as the "norm," the other is unfitting and is stigmatised. This creates chasms among the characters, women especially, and reinforces that state of "mental solitude" that only harms and restricts them to life dedicated to social propriety. Peterson calls this "a victory of [..] the perversely conventional over the open-minded,"[80] thus emphasising the natural but immoral image of Sarah and the unnatural but righteous character of Kathleen.

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[77] Dall'Bello and Bastos, "Subverting," 43.
[78] Peterson, *Mary Lavin*, 31.
[79] Ingman, "Masculinities in Mary Lavin's Short Stories," 32.
[80] Peterson, *Mary Lavin*, 30.

The mutual mental alienation between the female and male characters underscores gender stereotypes. It denies women vital channels of communication which would help them understand themselves and each other better, rather than perpetuate the patriarchal model of society. The characters in the story are disengaged from each other, women especially as they do not communicate. Whilst it can seem that the two women had social relationships with other characters in the story, they are mentally alone in their ordeals and exist only in the frames of their prescribed functions. Solitude is a negative aspect in this story as it also alludes to the danger it represents for the marital institution. "The typical witch of folklore should be an old woman dwelling off by herself in the woods,"[81] as E. William Monter argues. The reluctance of Kathleen to sympathise with Sarah in her pregnancy or even to confront her in an open manner and allow her a fair chance to explain herself not only dehumanises Sarah, but also exposes the taboo among women concerning such topics themes as sex, body, and physical transformation.

[81] E. William Monter, cited in Koch, 257.

CHAPTER 3: "The Nun's Mother"

Introductory Remarks

This chapter will focus on the story "The Nun's Mother," published in 1944 in the collection called *The Long Ago.* The story describes Mr. And Mrs. Latimer who are returning home by a taxi after dropping off their only daughter Angela at the convent where she had decided to spend her life as a nun. It is written in third-person narrative from the perspective of the main protagonist, Mrs. Latimer, whose observations on her life and relationships with her husband and daughter are revealed through psychonarration. The primary conflict is centred around Angela's decision to leave for her vocation that uncovers many issues in the complicated mother-daughter relationship. Both Mrs. Latimer and her daughter experience various states of social disengagement but, contrarily to the previous story, "The Nun's Mother" allows us to explore it from the opposite social perspective than the form of social disengagement exhibited in "Sarah." This chapter will deal with the two respectable women, mother, and daughter, who meet the social expectations imposed onto them. It will focus on three main aspects of the story: the social roles of Mrs. Latimer and Angela, the stigma surrounding the female body, and the family relationships of the Latimers.

"And assume a role she must": the life of Mrs. Latimer

Giovanna Tallone claims that "the assumption of roles within a restrictive social context is a recurring motif in Lavin's stories and within her realistic portrayal of Ireland."[82] Maud Latimer is a character that fits social conventions presented to her by the society. However, her life seems to be divided into several roles she is assumed to fulfil: that of wife, mother, and now the nun's mother. The narrative written in the form of psychonarration allows the reader to explore Maud as a combination of all of those roles and asserts that her real personality is unavailable neither to her husband, Luke, nor to her daughter, Angela. As opposed to the character of Sarah explored in the previous chapter, Mrs. Latimer is not disengaged from her surroundings as a social outcast. Elaine Wethington and Karl Pillemer suggest that "social integration […] encompasses being embedded in social, neighbourhood, and community

[82] Giovanni Tallone, "Theatrical trends in Mary Lavin's Early Stories," *Mary Lavin*, ed. Elke D'hoker (Sallins: Irish Academic Press, 2013), 66.

groups as well as having closer relationships from which one derives functional support."[83] Maud displays all of these modes and is not straightforwardly described as a character who might suffer from loneliness. However, her disengagement follows from her inability to communicate with the people around her. The only intimacy that she allows into her life is reserved to the physical relationship with her husband, but the need for spiritual closeness and recognition in another person is absent from Maud's life. A.A. Kelly in her critical study of Lavin's stories depicts Mrs. Latimer's life as "the failure of communication between intimately linked human beings."[84] The most interesting aspect of the protagonist is that Maud seems to be very much convinced of her vision of the world, and never questions her own life choices. The internal conflict displayed in this story stems from the contrast between Maud's life and Angela's decision to follower her vocation. Due to the inability to recognise the problem within herself, Mrs. Latimer's disengagement functions as her protection which guards her from realising the loneliness she experiences. This prompts the importance to distinguish between disengagement and engaged disengagement.

In his study on solitude Philip Koch argues that "there are modes of diminished engagement."[85] He elaborates that "[d]isengaged solitude […] is regularly threaded through and hemmed around by […] partial, indirect, substitution engagements, our involvements with reservoir-objects, personifications, and implicit background structures of personal involvement."[86] This suggests that to experience an intense state of solitude a person must not necessarily be isolated (cf. the character of Sarah explored in the previous chapter), but can also be actively incorporated into social structures. Solitude can be experienced subconsciously without one realising its existence, because of the common presupposition that lonely people are usually distinguishable through the circumstances of their lives (absence of a partner, conspicuous social withdrawal etc.). Maud experiences a state of engaged disengagement which she does not recognise since her life is distributed among the social roles she has to uphold. A possible explanation of her ignorance on this issue is that this state functions as her protection. Mrs. Latimer realises that there are certain limitations to the communication with her husband and daughter, but she never questions these.

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[83] Elaine Wethington and Karl Pillemer, "Social Isolation among Older People," *The Handbook of Solitude: Psychological Perspectives on Social Isolation, Social Withdrawal, and Being Alone,* ed. Robert J.Coplan and C.Bowker (Oxford:Wiley Blackwell,2014), 246.
[84] A.A. Kelly, "Religious Conventions," *Mary Lavin: Quiet Rebel* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1980), 92.
[85] Philip Koch, "Engaged Disengagement," Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court Printing, 1997), 66.
[86] Koch, "Engaged Disengagement," 88.

Throughout the narrative, various instances of willed silence are alluded to: "I'm afraid to ask her,"[87] "[…] it kept her lips closed,"[88] " she did not tell him,"[89] or "there were no words to describe it."[90] Here Lavin suggests that Maud does not even suspect a possibility of a different perspective that would encourage her to voice her anxieties to the two people who ought to be the closest ones in her life. Even the fact that the narrative is based on the representation of Mrs. Latimer's silent speech suggests that her true self is never shared with the world. Kelly proposes that Maud also restricts her own unvoiced contemplations "in case she falls into evil thoughts."[91] I suggest that this is due to the imposed social conventions, or in this case, social roles that she is expected to perform: "And assume a role she must,"[92] writes Lavin. Maud is portrayed as a character who prioritises her social image over the quality of the relationship with her husband and daughter. Kelly argues:

> Different illustrations of religious convention, often treated ironically, form an important theme in Mary Lavin's work […] The treatment of such themes reflects the author's awareness that the transcendental is often given insufficient, or warped human interpretation, embodied in formalistic ritual or denigrated to prescriptive rules. It is again a question of the external expression dominating, falsifying, or failing to express the inner spirit.[93]

This undoubtedly supports the line of reasoning that Mrs. Latimer's state of engaged disengagement is heavily influenced by the social conventions of the Irish middle-class. However, to interpret her only as a victim of her circumstances would be misleading and reductive. The family environment she exists in appears to allow for a revolt against the stereotypes, except that Maud chooses to disengage herself from the world and to follow the dictate of social roles, rather than challenge her prudishness and communicate her personal concerns or bring up some more intimate topics. In her narration Maud is shown to think that "interference was dangerous. It was not right to accept the responsibility of another soul."[94] This suggests that she consciously avoids the responsibility of communication, since in her understanding it carries a taboo of emotional involvement with other individuals, which all human relationships imply.

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87 Mary Lavin, "The Nun's Mother," *The Long Ago* (Dublin: Michael Joseph, 1944), 200.
88 Lavin, "The Nun's Mother," 201.
89 Lavin, "The Nun's Mother," 201.
90 Lavin, "The Nun's Mother," 204.
91 Kelly Kelly, "Religious Conventions," 93.
92 Mary Lavin, "The Nun's Mother," 203.
93 Kelly, "Religious Conventions," 85.
94 Lavin, "The Nun's Mother," 205.

However, such an attitude leads to and irreversible life-changing event: her daughter, who is described as a normal child, makes an unexpected decision to become a nun. Maud chose her life strategy to be the one of disengaged stereotype, an assemblage of roles she must follow, and which prevent her from expressing any emotional connectedness to her child. The same goes for her communication with her husband. Kelly easily characterises the relationship between Maud and Luke stating that "love for Mrs. Latimer remains at a strictly earthly, phallic level."[95] Similarly, the relationship between Maud and Agnes lacks any significant spiritual meaning. The possible interpretation of this is that for Mrs. Latimer motherhood was a pragmatic life choice, another role to fulfil, rather than a desire to love a child. Judith Still in her study of French feminists asserts that "the body gendered female […] is suffused with the maternal and the range of physic and economic issues that relate to motherhood and to reproduction."[96] It is probable that for Maud, motherhood was a choice partly imposed onto her by the economic and social conditions, which subsequently made her to neglect her other personal needs, and led to her disengagement from herself as well. This is not to exclude the fact that parenthood is one of the strongest instincts available to people, but to suggest that in a constricting environment, choices connected with maintaining the idealised models of marital life can suppress other human needs.

Maud and Angela and the stigma of the female body

As mentioned above, Mrs. Latimer does not appear to have any meaningful emotional connection with her daughter, and she does not share her experience of womanhood with Angela. Indeed, she is repulsed by the idea of explaining any intimate aspects of that experience to her daughter. Jeanette Robert Shumaker sums up their relationship by asserting that "shame over their bodies keeps Angela and Mrs. Latimer emotionally distant."[97] The mother and the daughter display a very common prudery which Shumaker calls "the self-hatred endangered by a religion that regards female sexuality as evil."[98] However, Maud does not seem to be a woman who does not enjoy sex with her husband; by far she very much identifies her love to him through that. Difficulties in communication occurs only when she looks at Angela. Lavin writes:

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[95] Kelly, "Religious Conventions," 94.
[96] Judith Still, "French Feminism and Writing the Body," *The History of Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. by Gill Plain and Susan Sellers (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 256.
[97] Jeanette Robert Shumaker, "Sacrificial Women in Short Stories by Mary Lavin and Edna O'Brien," *Studies in Short Fiction* 32 (1995), 189.
[98] Shumaker, "Sacrificial Women," 189.

> […] no more fun out shopping, no more flippancies, no more visits to the Small Women shops (matrons and outsize now for ever), no more angling to get new young men for parties (bridge and sandwiches now for ever), no more need to lay aside linen, no more need to be on the lookout for bargains in silver spoons and forks (even when they were going for a song). No need, in short to remain young.[99]

Maud clearly sees her daughter as an extension of her youth, but not as an individual human being. The chasm between Maud and Angela follows from the shame associated with their bodies. The former ponders further about things the two of them share: "[w]omen's bodies were so much more graceful; moulded so secretively, so subtly."[100] She continues to speculate about what life would look like if women were more frank about their anatomy: "none of the terrible reticence about the body between mothers and daughters, a reticence based on revulsion."[101] Perhaps for her, Angela is another reminder of her own unresolved issues of shame she experiences towards her body. Heather Ingman describes Maud as "trained in convent school to dress and undress under her dressing gown, […] unable to speak frankly to her daughter about sexual pleasures of marriage."[102] With Luke she can be her other self, a "wife," and performs a role in which intimate intricacies are not as naked and vulnerable as the physical nakedness itself. The female body in its full capacity is inaccessible to Maud, and probably to Angela as well, and exists in separate fragments of socially accepted experiences which never combine on a more profound, spiritual level. Mrs. Latimer often thinks of chastity, which Kelly identifies "as confusing in her mind the meanings of chastity and prudery, sexual purity and repression."[103] The two concepts seem to go hand in hand, most likely misinterpreted by the extremely rigid religious environment she lives in.

Such a revulsion to the female body can also originate from the overtly sexualised (and idealised) portrayal of the female body in popular culture and its actual natural imperfection. Henri Lefebvre states that "bodily lived experience […] may be both highly complex and quite peculiar because 'culture' intervenes here, with its illusory immediacy, via symbolism and via the long Judaea-Christian tradition."[104] Mrs. Latimer thinking that "[i]n art it actually was the other way round, as if women were the franker sex,"[105] suggests that the image perpetrated by

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[99] Lavin, "The Nun's Mother," 197.
[100] Lavin, "The Nun's Mother," 201.
[101] Lavin, "The Nun's Mother," 201.
[102] Heather Ingman, "Masculinities in Mary Lavin's Short Stories," *Mary Lavin*, ed. Elke D'hoker (Sallins: Irish Academic Press, 2013), 33.
[103] Kelly, "Religious Conventions," 93.
[104] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space,* trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), 40.
[105] Lavin, "The Nun's Mother," 201.

the society is very much different from her own individual experience. Kelly proceeds to claim that "[r]membrance of the social conditioning received by young Irish girls, catholic first, Irish second, female third, is a necessary adjunct to the full understanding of unexpressed feelings in these [Lavin's] characters."[106]

Angela's choice to devote herself to a life in a convent and the confused reaction it provokes from her parents highlights the superficial quality of their relationship to the child. The existing mother-daughter connection between the women seems to be most awkward here as it achieves the state of alienation between Maud and Angela. However, the reluctance to communicate does not occur only on Mrs. Latimer's part, but comes from her daughter as well. She seems to have followed the example of her mother and decided not to look for emotional support in her family, which apparently has never been offered to her. Her decision to give up any possibility of sexual life can be considered as her alternative answer to the religious society that promotes heterosexuality. There are several possible reasons behind Angela's decision. Shumaker suggests that "Lavin's 'The Nun's Mother' presents a related explanation for why girls want to become nuns — to avoid male predation."[107] This specifically refers to the ending of the story, where we learn about the flasher whom Angela might have encountered. It is suggested that this incident is the reason behind her sudden decision, though the possibility is strangely ignored by her parents. The other possible motivation is Angela's repressed sexuality, and the need to avoid heterosexual conventions. It is not my purpose to pinpoint specific motivations behind Angela's choice. There is very little evidence to suggest that possible homosexuality is the case behind her decision. However, what this story does highlight is a certain repulsion to heterosexual tradition.

Adrienne Rich in her essay "Compulsory Homosexuality and Lesbian Existence" states that "If we think of heterosexuality as the 'natural' emotional sensual inclination for women, lives such as these [homosexual] are seen as deviant, as pathological, or as emotionally and sensually deprived."[108] If it is the case that Angela is inclined to explore other options for her sexuality, and the promoted kind of heterosexuality is considered as "natural," in combination with the experienced prudery and embarrassment connected with female body, her choice can be seen as an attempt to avoid expectations she cannot and does not wish to meet. In a girl who is described as never particularly touched by the matters of the Church, the sudden recognition

[106] Kelly, "The Family and Intimate Relationships," 50.
[107] Shumaker, "Sacrificial Women," 188.
[108] Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Homosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5, no. 4 Women: Sex and Sexuality (Summer, 1980), 652. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3173834.

of religious responsibilities seems to be the result of her alienation from her own body and sexuality.

Indeed, the lack of communication between the two female characters about the shared experience of womanhood is striking, and it prompts us to analyse Maud's reluctance to talk to her daughter in order to understand Angela's motivation behind her vocation. It might seem clear why she would not wish to speak to her about the sexual relationships between men and women, but it is a mystery why she avoided the chances to understand her daughter's decision. Kelly suggests that Mrs. Latimer is ignorant of "any degree of love beyond that related to human sexuality,"[109] implying that Maud does not display emotionally sufficient motherly affection towards Angela. This would explain why the two women are so alienated from each other, which induces them to experience and extreme state of solitude that is never voiced.

In *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) Nancy Chodorow propounds that "[w]hat a girl comes to realize is that her common genital arrangement with her mother does not work to her advantage in forming a bond with her mother, does not make her mother love her more."[110] Angela probably realised that the fact that she and her mother possess a common ground for understanding in their bodies does not ensure emotional connection and motherly love. Mrs. Latimer most likely is a woman whose affections to her daughter do not exceed social expectations. The fact that all her life, she has been exposed to heterosexuality as the primary mode of bodily and emotional existence for women completely negates the possibility for intimate relationships with the female sex since for her, intimacy always coexists with sexuality.

Rich uses the term "lesbian continuum"[111] to expand the scope of intimate relationships that can occur among women stating that "it allows us to connect aspects of woman-identification as diverse as the impudent intimate girl-friendships […]."[112] By this she emphasises the importance of de-stigmatising and promoting the relationships among women, as well as encourages them to share their experience of womanhood with each other. Rich also comments on the "woman-hatred" which she considers to be "so embedded, so 'normal' […], that many women, even feminists and lesbians, fail to identify it until it takes, in their own lives, some permanently unmistakable and shattering form."[113] To a degree, this phenomenon informs the relationship between Angela and Maud as one between a daughter who failed to follow an

[109] Kelly, "Religious Conventions," 95.
[110] Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1978), 125.
[111] Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality," 648.
[112] Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality," 651.
[113] Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality," 658.

expected way of living and provoked many uncomfortable questions, and a mother who failed to give her daughter love and emotional support as she most likely did not want (or know how) to be a mother outside the frame of accepted social stereotypes.

The overall relationships of Latimers: Angela and Maud reconsidered

Another character worth exploring is Luke Latimer who is described by Lavin as "much more sincere than she [Maud] was."[114] Ingman suggests that "In Lavin's work, fathers are shown meditating in the often fraught relations between mother and daughter."[115] Luke is portrayed as ignorant of any tension between Maud and Angela and considers their relationship to be very natural: "[a]nd if by any chance he came into a room when they were talking (about getting the poodle's hair cut or putting more sugar in the rhubarb) he would scuttle out again with apologies, […] saying 'Don't let me disturb you.'"[116] It is again evident that the three members of the family exist only within the limits of their prescribed roles. Mr. Latimer, however, is the only person who displays genuine affections towards his wife and his daughter. For him, Angela's vocation seems unnatural and shocking, because he cannot imagine life without the explicitness of the physical body and its sexuality. Moreover, he does not even suspect Angela to have any issues with that. Ingman writes that he "has a healthy attitude towards the body,"[117] whereas Maud is much more emotionally constricted. Despite that, Luke does not take the responsibility on himself to enlighten Angela, and blindly entrusts this task to his wife, supposing that women are more intimate with each other than they ever will be with men. By functioning again within the range of socially appropriate norms of a husband and a father, he will never see Maud and Angela for who they are. I suggest that the three characters experience a state of subconscious mental solitude since they are able to share only the fragments of their lives that are deemed socially accepted.

Koch argues that "solitude" exists in a proximity, even with "encounter" in real life, and is constantly contrasted with reality,[118] meaning that human interactions within social structures are inevitable. Thus, to achieve a conscious state of disengagement is impossible. The Latimers are unconscious of their mental solitude because the constant pressure from the society does not allow them to realise that such a state exists. Still, it urges the unexpected decision of their daughter and exposes the gaps in communication in a no less important father-daughter

[114] Lavin, "The Nun's Mother," 202.
[115] Ingman, "Masculinities in Mary Lavin's Short Stories," 33.
[116] Lavin, "The Nun's Mother," 201.
[117] Ingman, "Masculinities," 33.
[118] Koch, "Images of Solitude," 102.

relationship. Further in her study on motherhood Chodorow mentions the "girl's feminine behavior in relation to her father" stating that "this behavior is one side of an interaction. A daughter looks for a primary person in her life other than her mother, and a father involves himself with his children in ways which encourage stereotypic gender-role behavior."[119] This suggests that despite Luke's sentiments to his daughter he is unable to reach out to her outside of his stereotypical gender-role. The cruelty of the social structures which are driven by the preliminary patriarchal conventions are thus highlighted in the short story.

The family space in this story is defined by the overpowering social space. Lefebvre writes that often "the outside of the community is dominated, while the indoor space of family life is appropriated."[120] Social stereotypes dominate the family space for the Irish middle-class of the time and assert the hierarchy of roles discarding the need for individual development. Parents like Luke and Maud Latimer perceive their children as the ones who will carry their social roles further in the family tree but are not really interested in them as individuals. Even if Mr. Latimer experiences paternal love to Angela it does not diminish the gruesome fact that he does not know how to participate in his daughter's character development and does not wish to share his life experience with her. The family here functions as a single unit and does not distinguish amongst individual needs of its members, but rather aims to fulfil the standard imposed by the society. The weight of stereotypes that became the mundane norm nobody questions deprives people of intimate relationships and make loneliness an inherent condition of survival in social environment.

Concluding Remarks

Richard F. Peterson states that "the conflict between the emotional and spiritual truths is developed, but never resolved in this highly impressionistic story."[121] "The Nun's Mother" is essentially built around one primary conflict: the lack of emotional and spiritual intimacy among the family members, which subsequently spurs the states of social disengagement and solitude. Lavin allows the narrative to go no further than Maud Latimer's consciousness but her account provides enough material for the analysis of the issues underlying the life of the Irish middle-class family. Maud and Angela experience alienation from themselves and from their own bodies, because the society negates the importance of intimacy among women. Lefebvre claims that "[a]ny true appropriation of sex demands that a separation be made between the

[119] Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, 119.
[120] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 166.
[121] Richard F. Peterson, *Mary Lavin* (Boston: Twain Publishers, 1978), 36.

reproductive function and sexual pleasure."[122] Social conventions propose a life fragmented into socially accepted roles.

Tallone suggests that Lavin's characters often display theatrical behaviour and that "[t]hese performances involve sensitive and lonely characters, who are unable to face life or to find their own place in life, and thus hope to gain a new or accepted identity in the role they assume."[123] Because of this lack of communication, Maud experiences an intense state of engaged disengagement which functions as her defence mechanisms in order to avoid the responsibility and messiness of human relationships. The chasm between herself and her daughter most likely influenced Angela's decision to become a nun and exposed the superficial maternal and paternal relationships that do not exceed beyond normative social expectations. All of this is primarily due to the religious propaganda of the Catholic Church in Ireland that acknowledged only heterosexual, strictly procreative intimacy among the husband and wife and discouraged other relationships from existing. The girls that grew up in convent schools were taught to be ashamed of their body, and instead sought for its perfection and purity in religion.

This story highlights the importance of women's mutual relationships and communication if they are to liberate themselves from the fetters of convention to overcome the long-lasting taboo associated with female bodies. Adrienne Rich aptly concludes:

> Women identification is a source of energy, a potential springhead of female power, violently curtailed and wasted under the institution of heterosexuality. […] the forcing of such relationships into dissimulation and their disintegration under intense pressure have meant an incalculable loss to power of all women to change the social relations of sexes, to liberate ourselves and each other.[124]

Maud makes an unfathomable decision of hovering over the practical aspects of her life she has lost with Angela's decision, but does not consider herself as responsible for her daughter's emotional unavailability. A.A. Kelly criticises Mrs. Latimer stating that "[i]t is she herself who is retreating into an unreal role as the Nun's Mother and failing to communicate with her daughter at a crucial point in child's life."[125] Angela's vocation is a symbolic gesture of ostracising herself from the world of human feelings and emotions, due to the impossibility to experience these within her own family. Solitude plays a crucial role in this story and exposes the malfunctioning social structures that are designed only to tie one down, but not liberate.

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[122] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 167.
[123] Tallone, "Theatrical Trends," 66.
[124] Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality," 657.
[125] Kelly, "Religious Conventions," 94.

CHAPTER 4: "In the Middle of the Fields"

Introductory remarks

"In the Middle of the Fields" was published alongside Mary Lavin's eighth collection of the same name, *In the Middle of the Fields and Other Stories*, in 1967, and belongs to one of most famous "widowhood" tales. It gives an account of Vera, a newly widowed woman, who is trying to navigate her life as an owner of large estate in Meath. She meets with difficulties in communication with men, who often display patronising behaviour towards her, especially when she tries to arrange for her fields to be mowed. The plot culminates around Vera and Bartley, a man hired to top the grass for her, when they are engulfed in passions of youth lost to both with their spouses. The two stories discussed in the previous chapters dealt with solitude which was experienced silently and manifested through the state of deliberate social disengagement by female characters as a response to their immediate social environment. "In the Middle of the Fields" attends to themes of solitude expectable in Vera due to her widowhood.

The focus of this chapter will be on the traditional notions of widowhood promoted by the society and its double standards. Next, it will concentrate on the image of the fields and its various connotations. This chapter will also explore a possible "unintended" state of social disengagement imposed onto characters by the social conventions. I will address the double standards of widowhood primarily from the socioeconomic perspective. This will be done to highlight the difference in society's treatment of widows like Vera, and widowers like Bartley, especially when it comes to spheres of business.

Socioeconomic perspectives on widowhood

Rosemary Blieszner in her socialist-feminist study on widowhood asserts that "widowed persons are defined as 'others,' as if being married is the only most desirable state."[126] Vera is a woman trying to lead her life amidst the social network of people who previously considered her husband the head of the household. She constantly gets "special" treatment from members of her community which, in many cases, can seem patronising. At the same time Vera is evidently often confused whether she ought to accept such lenience with gratitude or criticism.

[126] Rosemary Blieszner, "A Socialist-Feminist Perspective on Widowhood," *Journal of Ageing Studies* 7, no. 2 (1993): 173. https://doi.org/10.1016/0890-4065(93)90032-F.

"'That's very kind of you,' she said, but a little doubtfully,"[127] writes Lavin. Even though Vera strives to maintain her social position as firmly as she can, the line above suggests that the character is very uncertain about her new position in the social hierarchy. Another widowed character in the story is Bartley Crossen who as a young man lost his first wife Birdie, whom he passionately loved. Lavin implicitly juxtaposes the two experiences of widowhood that, on the one side, share the same experience but, on the other, exemplify the discrepancy in how the society treats widowers and widows.

Blieszner argues that "when widowed persons are compared to those who are married, most negative, long-term psychological consequences of widowhood can be attributed to socioeconomic deprivation rather than to widowhood itself." [128] What is meant by "socioeconomic deprivation" is the exclusion of widowed people from the societal structures whose basic unit is marriage. For women, such situation would have been even more challenging since woman's ability to climb the social ladder was conditioned by the role of a wife. As Elke D'hoker propounds, it was only in this role that women could "carve out a position for themselves in the community and only widows could autonomously run a business before passing it over to next male heir."[129] The situation is similar to Vera's, but her ability to run the estate by herself is still questioned by other men in the story. The economic depravity often encountered by widows is something that widowers did not experience as greatly after a loss of a wife. Blieszner states that "In widowhood, [widows] lose the income that had been paid directly to their husbands, a more serious loss than experienced by widowers."[130]

Another point worth mentioning is the division of labour in a typical Irish household of the twentieth century. Blieszner in her general account of the domestic labour in Western societies concludes that "the […] tasks traditionally performed by wives include those necessary for sustenance of everyday life and achievement of basic personal needs insistent the house — e.g. cooking, cleaning, and laundry."[131] However, Caitriona Clear in her survey of family life in twentieth-century rural Ireland claims that despite the conventions prevalent at the time women often were in charge of the finances in rural households.[132] I suggest that the

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[127] Mary Lavin, "In the Middle of the Fields," *In the Middle of the Fields and Other Stories* (London: Macmillan Company, 1967), 62.
[128] Blieszner, "A Socialist-Feminist Perspective on Widowhood," 174.
[129] Elke D'hoker, " Family and Community in Mary Lavin's Grimes Stories, *Mary Lavin*, ed. Elke D'hoker (Sallins: Irish Academic Press, 2013), 158.
[130] Blieszner, "A Socialist-Feminist Perspectives on Widowhood," 175.
[131] Blieszner, "A Socialist-Feminist Perspectives on Widowhood," 176.
[132] Caitriona Clear, "Hardship, Help and Happiness in Oral History Narratives of Women's Lives in Ireland 1921-1961," *Oral History* 31, no. 2 (2003): 36. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40179755.

discrepancy between these two accounts of domestic labour division is encapsulated in the character of Vera. Since the narrative does not describe the pragmatic side of her marriage, it would be inappropriate to conclude that she had no rights in her own house. On the contrary, her ability to protect herself when she senses that Bartley might be discriminating against her, proves that Vera is more than capable to manage the estate after the death of her husband. Maurice Harmon notes that "their exchanges reveal her strength of character, shrewd business mind, and ability to stand up for herself."[133]

As for Bartley, from the socioeconomic perspective he is unlikely to have lost the source of income with the death of his first wife Birdie, but he did lose a person who, in pragmatic terms, was responsible for the practical household tasks. Blieszner claims: "Because women and men usually are not equally skilled in the performance of household tasks, widows are actually better prepared to live as single, self-sufficient adults."[134] From this viewpoint it is logical that Bartley married for the second time, which has been described by the people as a "sensible" marriage. Yet, we get the sense that it is still frowned upon in the community from the comments made by Vera's herdsman: "It was his first wife. You know he was married twice?"[135] For sure, the phenomenon of a second marriage in the Irish rural middle-class society was a thing of speculations, but it was, probably, still more acceptable in a widower than a widow. Marie Arndt claims that "widows are to follow official ethos that demands a denial of sexual desire for pleasure and comfort, because procreation is the only reason for sex in the morally restrictive Ireland Lavin writes about."[136] It should be noted that while sexual depravity is not a central theme of "In the Middle of the Fields," (it is only vaguely suggested in the story's latter part where Bartley attempts to kiss Vera), it is a prominent subject in other widow stories by Lavin such as "In a Café" or "The Cuckoo-Spit."[137]

What is highlighted in the story under discussion in this chapter is the constant restraint of passion that the characters encounter due to social conventions. Ned, as a representative of the public, constantly emphasises that it is only natural to forget the lost loved ones. Vera does

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[133] Maurice Harmon, "Heartfelt Narratives: Mary Lavin's Life and Work," *Mary Lavin*, 23.
[134] Blieszner, "A Socialist-Feminist Perspective on Widowhood," 176.
[135] Lavin, "In the Middle of the Fields," 61.
[136] Marie Arndt, "Narratives of Internal Exile in Mary Lavin's Short Stories," *International Journal of English Studies* 2, no. 2 (2002): 111. https://www.academia.edu/1944246/Narratives_of_internal_exile_in_Mary_Lavins_short_stories.
[137] "In a Café" and "The Cuckoo-Spit" portray the character of the same name, Vera Traske, who deals with the hardships of widowhood. The first story tells about an encounter of Vera with a foreign painter in a café in Dublin, where both of them express the longing for physical intimacy. The second story describes Vera's good sense when she avoids a romantic relationship with a man due to her unresolved trauma of the loss of her husband.

not agree with such a prospect and in the paasages where psychonarration is used by Lavin she asserts that the passion she experienced towards her husband cannot and should not be suppressed. She vehemently disagrees with the fact that to better cope with bereavement she must let go of her strong loving feelings towards her deceased partner. "Had he really forgotten?"[138] she asked herself. It is hard to speculate about Vera's personal intentions. Yet psychological issues of widowhood in this story are contrasted with social conventions and their negative effect on the widowed characters.

The symbolic value of the fields

The most prominent spatial imagery in the whole narrative are the fields. Sínead Mooney claims that while "'In the Middle of the Fields' is set entirely within the protagonist's farmhouse, […] its opening sentence suggests Irish pastoral of a kind."[139] "Like a rock in the sea, she was islanded by the fields, the heavy grass washing about the house, and the cattle wading in it as in water,"[140] writes Lavin. At first Vera implies that other characters associate the fields with her husband, as in "'I imagine I see him every time I look out there,' they would say and glance out nervously over the darkening fields when they were leaving."[141] However, the space around Vera has more dimension to it rather than a mere reminiscence of her husband. The fields also represent Vera's independence and economic sufficiency. Grass topping is one of the sources of income for her farm in Co. Meath, ascribing a symbol of labour to them. Deidre Flynn connects Lavin's implementation of images of nature to "the idealised rural representation of Ireland that grew from and with the Gaelic revival and the fact that social expectations have not been matched by the freedom of post-independent Ireland."[142] Indeed, the first paragraph of the story starts with an appealing simile comparing Vera to "a rock in the sea, islanded by fields,"[143] suggesting that the landscape will be perceived as beautiful and complete. However, later on the reality of the fields and what they represent for the character is revealed; "It wasn't [her husband] she saw when she looked out at the fields. It was the ugly

[138] Lavin, "In the Middle of the Fields," 64.
[139] Sínead Mooney, "'Stranded Objects': Topographies of Loss in Mary Lavin's Widow Stories," *Mary Lavin,* 191.
[140] Lavin, "In the Middle of the Fields," 64.
[141] Lavin, "In the Middle of the Fields," 60.
[142] Deidre Flynn, "'Come Up to a Place Like This? The Problem with Seeking Sanctuary in the Rural in Mary Lavin's Short Stories," *Irish University Review* 49, no.2 (2019): 219. DOI: 10.3366/iur.2019.0402.
[143] Lavin, "In the Middle of the Fields," 60.

tufts and tow and scutch that whitened the tops of the grass and gave it the look of a sea in storm, spattered with broken foam."[144]

Vera's surroundings symbolise the reality of her own turbulent life, which she tries to lead as independently as possible. Maura Cronin in her study of class and status in twentieth century Ireland asserts that "in rural areas in mid-twentieth century Ireland, land was the ultimate determinant of social status."[145] Logically, Vera ought to be perceived as an influential woman. Yet, as mentioned previously, gender stereotypes and conventions associated with widowhood complicate her position in the social hierarchy. Since the land that she owns has its boundaries, it often serves as a reminder of the existing limitations to her life. The name of the story itself suggests Vera being "in the middle" of something, which alludes to her abstract position in life as in the middle of the social space. The latter one is incapable of classifying her in the existing social structures.

According to Henri Lefebvre, "visible boundaries, such as walls or enclosures in general, give rise for their part to an appearance of separation between spaces where in fact what exists is an ambiguous continuity."[146] The "separation between spaces" can be applied to Lavin's story as a hint to the fact that the fields are not Vera's strong element, since the farming is largely a male-dominated industry, and she finds it difficult to negotiate with other farmers around her. Their spatial features point at the prominent psychological constraints they represent for the protagonist, especially the competing notions of separation and continuity. Separation is manifested through the abstract boundaries associated with the fields. Yet continuity suggests itself by disputing those limitations, such as class, or status, which are largely imposed by Vera's social environment. The fields thus become an emblem of hardship, both psychological and economic. They are simply difficult to maintain. Even the banal service of topping the grass evokes anxiety in Vera reminding her of a fight she must win.

Another possible connotation of the fields is foregrounded by the male characters of the story, Bartley, and Ned, who often attribute them the quality of safety: "And for that matter, where could you be safer than in the middle of the fields, with the innocent beasts asleep around you?"[147] However, Vera's reaction is that of apprehension. She fears darkness and she never ventures out after dark. The physical space around her indicates, as mentioned previously,

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[144] Lavin, "In the Middle of the Fields," 60.
[145] Maura Cronin. "Class and Status in Twentieth-Century Ireland: Evidence from Oral History," *Saothar* 32 (2007): 34. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23201438.
[146] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space,* trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), 87.
[147] Lavin, "In the Middle of the Fields," 60.

instability, and the fear manifests itself in the dark horizons of the fields that engulf her at night. On the one hand, the fields are the source of her economic status and stability, on the other hand, they also represent the uncertainty associated with her specific social position as a widowed woman.

The meaning of solitude

"In the Middle of the Fields" approaches the themes of solitude from a different perspective than "Sarah," or "The Nun's Mother." In widowhood, solitude is an expectable side effect. It is suffered publicly, and its causes present solitude as a natural reaction to the situation. In a collective study on loneliness and its effects on widowhood Rebecca L. Utz et. al. sugges:

> The death of a spouse/partner signifies the loss of a significant attachment figure that, likely provided a meaningful and intimate source of social support. [P]ast studies have found that marital status, particularly widowhood, is among the strongest predictors of loneliness."[148]

Arndt propounds that not only do Lavin's widows experience a new state of intense solitude, but they also "are in different ways trying to cope with a situation where their social status has been reduced."[149] She continues to argue that in the Irish middle-class society widows were "not expected to look for a new man, especially not if they have children,"[150] since they have already achieved their main purpose. This element is more prominent in Lavin's other widowhood stories.[151] In "In the Middle of the Fields" Vera is as if socially disengaged due to the existing social structures that see her as "other" — not fitting within the idealised community, which is founded on the ideal of marriage, but she is also not fitting for total exclusion. It would be inappropriate to suggest that this story promotes the same radical views on the possibility of romantic relationships in widowhood.

Nevertheless, since the issue is voiced in Lavin's other stories there is a possibility that the same social expectations might be forced onto Vera as well. The loneliness that she experiences due to her bereavement is natural. Yet what would be unnatural is the expectation that Vera will not engage in another relationship. This is implied by Bartley himself when he suggests that companionship would be benefiting for her, yet immediately corrects himself to

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[148] Rebecca L. Utz, Kristin L. Swenson, Michael Caserta, Dale Lund, and Brian de Vries, "Feeling Lonely Versus Being Alone: Loneliness and Social Support Among Recently Bereaved Persons," *Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* 69, no. 1 (2014): 86. doi:10.1093/geronb/gbt075.
[149] Arndt, "Narratives of Internal Exiles in Mary Lavin's Short Stories,"111.
[150] Arndt, "Narratives of Internal Exiles in Mary Lavin's Short Stories," 111.
[151] F.e. "In a Café," "The Cuckoo-Spit". See more above footnote 128.

add "It would have to be another woman, of course." Here Lavin suggests that widowhood in women was stigmatised in the Irish middle-class society, which insisted on their social disengagement and sexual restraining.

Philip Koch in his study on solitude proposes that "one of the most fervently celebrated virtues of solitude is its ability to provide a place of refuge from beleaguering toils of social life."[152] What Koch offers is to look at social disengagement as means of withdrawing from social structures, which when done voluntarily can have positive effects. Yet what Vera is experiencing is a forceful withdrawal from social structures that were previously accessible to her due to her marital status. D'hoker asserts that "Lavin's widows permanently inhabit this 'past tense', continually looking backward; they are […] 'stranded objects', aftermaths, bodies dealing with the existential conundrum."[153] Social disengagement in this story manifests through Vera's decision to stay at her farm in Meath, even when everybody thought she would leave: "No one ever thought you'd stay on here after your husband died,"[154] claims Bartley. It is as if Vera is a social outcast whom nobody wants to confront directly. She is ostracised from the community and figuratively suggests that someone ought to tend to her needs, when she argues with Bartley about the postponement of topping the grass: "I thought you'd treat me differently. I'm to wait after this one, and after that one, and in the end my fields will go wild."[155]

The emblem of the fields in this case can be understood as representing Vera's personal needs that she has been suppressing for a long time. She is on the outskirts of her community, and not only does she have to adjust to the lifestyle of a widow, but she also must deal with sexist communication from others. It is difficult to determine the specifics of her motivations and desires, but what is evident from Vera's argument with Bartley is her reluctance to conform with the unwritten rules that her society imposes on women in her position. The term "unwanted solitude" seems most fitting here. Of course, solitude which has negative effects on a person is never a "wanted" one. But when used in juxtaposition with social expectations imposed onto widowed people, it indicates to the fact that the life of conventions is not spiritually satisfying. Koch argues that "solitude is the time of greatest freedom — to do the works of solitude. But there are other actions, social actions, which solitude does not give us greater freedom to

[152] Philip Koch, "Virtues of Solitude," *Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter* (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court Printing, 1997), 107.
[153] Mooney, "Stranded Objects": Topographies of Loss in Mary Lavin's Widow Stories," 191.
[154] Lavin, "In the Middle of the Fields," 68.
[155] Lavin, "In the Middle of the Fields," 67.

perform."[156] The primary effect that conventional widowhood inflicts upon people is the sense of irrevocable incompleteness. It puts widowed people, women especially, in contrast with those who are married.

When Bartley spontaneously tries to kiss Vera, he reopens the issue of restrained feelings towards Birdie, his first wife. Harmon proposes that "behind their transaction lies a warmth of feeling that arises from memories of Bartley's first wife who has the kind of impetuous, loving nature."[157] As mentioned in the first subheading, Ned is the character who vaguely introduces the idea that it is normal, if not necessary, to forget your deceased loved ones. Bartley has suppressed his passion that he experienced with his wife Birdie, and later married "sensibly." However, it could have been the pressure of the society to forget your loved ones could have potentially led him to live an emotionally disengaged life. Vera in this situation is more capable of understanding her own and his feelings than Bartley. She suggests: "It was the other one you should blame, that girl, your first wife, Birdie! Blame her!"[158] Vera points to an internal conflict that Bartley is experiencing. In this story it is he who is forced to marry again "sensibly", although he stayed emotionally faithful to his first wife.

D'hoker in her essay on ageing in short stories by Irish women writers suggests that "similarities between past and present scenes bring out the continuity between young and old age, […] while the opposition between memories and present experiences points to the ageing protagonist's sense of alienation, fragmentation, and discontinuity."[159] Bartley and Vera experience similar states, since they are both connected to the image of the fields. Bartley courted his first wife there, Vera lived there with her husband. The fields are a point of relatedness between the two and the feelings they experience due to their widowhood. Both experience discontinuity between the present and the past. Vera is in the middle of her social space, whilst Bartley finds himself in the middle of the conflict between passion and sensibility. The state of social disengagement is caused by the feelings that they experience for the departed spouses, as well as supported by social conventions.

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[156] Philip Koch, Philip Koch, "Chapter 8: The Completions of Encounter," 143.
[157] Maurice Harmon, "Heartfelt Narratives: Mary Lavin's Life and Work," 23.
[158] Lavin, "In the Middle of the Fields," 72.
[159] Elke D'hoker, Experiences of Ageing in Short Stories by Irish Women Writers," *Nordic Irish Studies,* 17, no. 1 (2018): 150. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26657503.

Concluding remarks

In "In the Middle of the Fields" Lavin exposes the socioeconomic double standards for widows and widowers, highlighting the price women have to pay in order to belong to social hierarchies of the Irish middle-class. Marie Arndt concludes that "Lavin also deals with single women and their way of coping in an environment where a woman has no definite role to play unless she marries or is strong enough to carve out a life for herself."[160] For Vera it is a battle to be won, since she appears as a strong, capable woman. Yet the weight of social expectations of women in her position does not correspond with her own decisions to experience her life as it suits her. The fields constrict her in many ways — first, they delineate her economic status in the society, which is confusing to its members. Secondly, they remind her of that instability that came with the death of her husband. Contrarily to that, they also liberate her by giving her financial independence and a source of self-sufficiency.

The interactions of Bartley and Vera suggest the "unwanted" state of social disengagement imposed onto them by the community due to pre-existing stereotypes and conventions. However, both characters dispute the society's stance on this suggesting that an emotionally and spiritually fulfilled life is a vital part of their well-being. Catherine A. Murphy asserts that "the story thus implies that the loved who have died are a part of the ambiguous force of the extended dimension apprehended through imagination; and that for those who have experienced profound love, the death of a beloved is never absolute, the beloved never wholly absent."[161]

The fields thus function as the point of relatedness for Vera and Bartley, where Lavin achieves a connection between the experiences of a widower and a widow. For Vera it is the conflict between her and the society.For Bartley the fields remind of his first wife Birdie, which reveals his internal struggle of being emotionally faithful either to Birdie, or to his present wife. Even though Vera and Bartley are treated differently by the society according to their sex, the stigma they carry suggests that in an emotionally constricting society people who appear to be outside of the idealised version of marriage ought to ostracise themselves emotionally and socially. All to maintain the perfectionist model of social conventions. Such a society resembles Michel Foucault's "disciplinary society" where discipline "dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it reserves the course of energy, the power that might result from it, and turns

[160] Arndt, "Narratives of Internal Exiles in Mary Lavin's Short Stories,"112.
[161] Catherine A. Murphy, "Ironic Vision of Mary Lavin," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal,* 12, no. 3 (1979): 76. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24780338.

it into a relation of strict subjection."[162] In this widowhood story by Lavin we again encounter a society that plays a crucial role in people's lives through distributing punishment to those who willingly or unwillingly set themselves outside the accepted social structures. Social disengagement here represents a paradox that is refused by the characters, yet at the same time it is also experienced by them.

[162] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, Inc., 1995): 138.

CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

Through the analysis of three short stories, this thesis has explored some of the main aspects of Lavin's writing. These include those that have been considered essential for her work's contested categorisation — feminism, and recognisable Irishness. I would like to return to Frank O'Connor's ironic comments about the insufficient nationalistic focus in Lavin's story. In *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* O'Connor states that the only story by Mary Lavin where "an Irishman" can feel at home is "The Patriot Son" which he calls "a familiar ground, the ground of O'Flaherty and O'Casey."[163] Indeed, even though Lavin's characters do not express explicit political views, and can hardly be called "outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society,"[164] she extends the range of issues experienced by the Irish middle-class from the merely nationalistic and political to the personal. O'Connor himself fails to recognise the theme of loneliness as being actively discussed in Lavin's stories. Yet, her approach to solitude, though different to those of O'Connor, O'Flaherty and O'Casey, supports his opinion that the short story should depict "an intense awareness of human loneliness."[165] My argument is that, in several Lavin's short stories, the characters can be seen as representing various universal traits and issues – mostly related to various concepts of solitude and social disengagement. I also propose that these are best interpreted in view of the realities of the early- and mid-twentieth-century Irish social and family life.

In each of the three stories Irishness is manifested differently. Whilst "Sarah" and "The Nun's Mother" depict social environment as influenced by constricting Catholic beliefs and thus emphasise the sociopolitical aspect of Irish middle-class society, "In the Middle of the Fields" is a story where the manifestation of Irishness is the least conspicuous. Nevertheless, recognisable Irishness is an important asset that Lavin uses in her stories to create a social environment which highlights the power that social and religious institutions can have over human lives. Deborah Averill in her study of the Irish short story speaks about the recurring conflict between the "individual and the community" where she suggests that due to the excessive exclusivity directed towards Irish society many of the authors "could not achieve the

[163] Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2004), chapter 11, Kindle.
[164] Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice,* "Author's Introduction," Kindle.
[165] Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice,* "Author's Introduction," Kindle.

stable, universalised view of human life."[166] Lavin's stories do precisely the opposite in taking the national context out of the spotlight (while keeping it there as a backdrop) and focussing on issues experienced by the middle-class in societies worldwide.

As mentioned in the *Introduction* many feminist critics of Lavin's time like A.A. Kelly, Patricia Meszaros or Jeannette Shumaker consider her an "atypical" writer. Elke D'hoker subsequently elaborates on this stating that "her women are not rebellious young women who try to escape the repressive middle-class society; and although they are often lonely, they are not the typical outsiders who are alienated from a society that they criticise from a distance."[167] Moreover, by depicting lives of mostly middle-class women who do not exceed and fight against the frames of their social roles, Lavin also voices the problematics feminist movements exposed throughout the twentieth century worldwide. Even though her female and male characters often support stereotypical gender constructions, they still point to traumas caused by their constricted family and social spaces. D'hoker expounds that Lavin introduces "a rich array of women characters with different sensibilities" which makes the female characters "considerably widened and enriched" in Irish literature.[168]

The focus of this thesis has largely been on Lavin's women, with the aim to prove their relevance for feminist discourse (though male characters have also been included in the analysis). The goal has been to propose a general critique of the social space depicted in the three stories which primarily seeks to control and oppress its members rather than support an individual expression. Such an environment is supported by the ever-present sense of solitude which haunts the characters preventing them from experiencing emotionally fulfilled lives. The three stories feature various battles women encounter in such limiting space, which have one binding aspect in them — the states of social disengagement. I use this term throughout the thesis to refer to the kind of experience that the women in the discussed stories represent, whilst also being depicted as active members of society. Philip Koch in his study on solitude states that disengagement from other people is not necessarily conscious.[169] The solitude that the characters experience is primarily caused by the demands of the social space around them. The three stories support the prominence of the state of social disengagement encountered by the characters due to the emotionally constrictive environment as depicted by Lavin.

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[166] Deborah M. Averill, *The Irish Short Story from George Moore to Frank O'Connor* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984): 24. Cited in Elke D'hoker *Irish Women Writers and the Modern Short Story* (2013): 5.
[167] Elke D'hoker, "Beyond the Stereotypes: Mary Lavin's Irish Women," Irish Studies Review 16, no.4 (November 2008): 427, https://doi.org/10.1080/09670880802481270.
[168] D'hoker, "Beyond the stereotypes," 427-428.
[169] Philip Koch, *Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter* (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court Printing, 1997): 58.

"Sarah" exposes the dichotomy between different versions of femininity, where one, instantiated by Kathleen Kedrigan, is socially acceptable, whilst the other, represented by Sarah, is publicly condemned. Social structures call for "worthiness" in people and humiliate those who do not obey. This leads to Sarah's complete alienation from the society whilst still performing within it. Such superficial attitudes towards women reveal the chasm among female characters which reinforces the state of social disengagement and taboos those channels of communication it deems inappropriate. The mutual mental alienation between the female and male characters underscores gender stereotypes prevalent in a middle-class society. The story also unveils a taboo among women concerning such topics as sex, body, and physical transformations. Sarah's subsequent death depicts a triumph of hypocrisy over sincerity in her community.

"The Nun's Mother" looks at the problematics of the communication amongst women from a perspective of the mother-daughter relationship. The two women portrayed, Maud and Angela Latimer, again reinforce the previously mentioned lack of communication between female characters. Maud is a person who misunderstands the difference between the spiritual and physical love, and since for her intimacy is always perfunctory and connected to sexuality, it forbids her to have a close and emotionally fulfilled relationship with her daughter. The latter also questions the impacts of "compulsory heterosexuality"[170] which is presented as the only natural way of sexual expression. This implies that in such an environment the only acceptable way to experience emotional fulfilment is through heterosexual marriage, thus negating other kinds of intimate relationships with the female sex. In this tale social space prevails over the family space, where the society is a key aspect for uncovering the malfunctioning structures that are designed to oppress its members. The relationships between members of the family of Latimers unravel the subconscious experience of mental solitude since they can share only those bits of their lives that are perceived socially appropriate. For Maud and Angela, the weight of conventions which nobody challenges robs them of a mutual intimate relationship, making loneliness an inherent condition for survival in social environment.

In "In the Middle of the Fields" Lavin deals with the double standards applied to widows and widowers through the lives of Vera and Bartley. Here society imposes a stigma onto the widowed people by excluding them emotionally and socially from the available structures, because they appear outside of the idealised model of the marital institution. This subsequently

[170] Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Homosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5, no. 4 Women: Sex and Sexuality (Summer, 1980), 652.

brings about the state of "unintended" social disengagement. Despite the differences in Vera's and Bartley's experiences of widowhood the symbol of the fields acts as common ground for understanding of the imposed state of solitude for both characters. The fields act as a limitation for Vera, representing her economic status in the community, as well as reminding her of the instability that came with the death of her husband. Yet, they also represent liberation and are a source of self-sufficiency. The state of solitude in this story is "unwanted" for the characters, and they challenge it by suggesting that an emotionally satisfied life is necessary for their happiness.

Even though during her most active time (roughly 1940s till 1980s) Mary Lavin did not receive a sufficient critical recognition, lately her works have attracted growing attention. Several critical works over the past few decades have argued for Lavin's inclusion in the canon of Irish literature, including Maureen O'Rourke Murphy and James Killop's *An Irish Literature Reader: Poetry, Prose, Drama* (2006), or Anne Owen Week's anthology *Irish Women Writers: An Uncharted Tradition* (1990). The repeated effort to include Lavin into a discussion of Irish short story proves that the themes she explores in her works are timeless and depict human character in its most diverse form.

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