A family portrait: Domestic dynamics in the fiction of Mary Lavin

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A FAMILY PORTRAIT: DOMESTIC DYNAMICS IN THE FICTION OF MARY LAVIN

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

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ABSTRACT

Mary Lavin (1912-1996) was fairly well-known in Ireland during her lifetime; however, there has been relatively little critical attention paid to her, especially in America, throughout her fifty-year career. This study focuses on the domestic dynamics of the family in Lavin’s fiction, whose world is influenced by the more harsh realities of early twentieth-century Irish society: the Victorian expectations of traditional gender roles, a rigid social caste system, and, at times, misguided religion. It is the purpose of this study to explore whether Lavin’s characters can find happiness and fulfillment by acting according to personal conscience within this closely-prescribed social framework. Lavin’s work explores a wide range of human experiences within this framework from both the male and the female perspectives. This study also analyzes several stories for which very little, if any, criticism exists, including “The Cemetery at the Demesne” and “The New Gardener.”
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHRONOLOGY</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2 MARY LAVIN: PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3 WIVES</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4 HUSBANDS</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5 DAUGHTERS</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 6SONS</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PREFACE

While Mary Lavin was fairly well-known in Ireland during her lifetime and while her death in 1996 warranted front-page news in Dublin, there has been relatively little critical attention paid to her, especially in America, throughout her fifty-year career. In fact, her books have been out of print for possibly two decades; the remnants lie nestled on library shelves, with their pages aging like fine wine, in the most surprising places, including a small town in Texas. However, the State University of New York at Binghampton does house a collection of her letters.

One of the first studies of her work to appear in America was in a doctoral dissertation written by B. J. Roark in 1968 for the University of Colorado. In the 1970s, two men produced biographies of her, based on personal interviews. These two biographies, by Zack Bowen (1975) and by Richard Peterson (1978), include some analysis of her work and are the main sources available to American scholars interested in her work today. As a result, they are widely quoted by me and by the handful of other people who have written about her in the past twenty years. Recent Lavin scholarship has included a book by A. A. Kelly, *Mary Lavin: Quiet Rebel* (1980); perhaps a dozen journal articles (including one curiously published in Tokyo); a few Master’s theses; and a couple of dissertations that include her as part of a wider study. And, her biographical sketch does seem to be a regular feature in most of the major literary reference books. At any rate, it should be noted that this study analyzes several stories for which very little criticism exists (literally maybe only a line or two), if any at all, thereby exploring new territory. In the late 1970s, Richard Peterson, a professor of English at Southern Illinois
University, recognized Mary Lavin as a major contributor to the development of the Irish short story, but the reason she has been passed over by critics can only be based on speculation. It is possible that female critics have overlooked her because she was not an obvious or typical feminist, while other critics may simply be unaware of the scope and depth of her craftsmanship. In addition to bringing due attention to an important twentieth-century artist, another purpose of this study is to stress the universality and richness of Lavin’s work as it reveals the realities and the joys of the human experience, regardless of nationality or sex. In her work, she captures the private experiences of both women and men, which may serve as a role model for those who wish to foster further understanding and mutual cooperation between the genders in the upcoming century.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I owe thanks to Dr. Richard Harp, my advisor at UNLV, for introducing me to Irish Literature and to Mary Lavin, and for his encouragement and patience while I have been writing this thesis. I would also like to thank my thesis and comprehensive exam committee, Dr. Darlene Unruhe, Dr. Leon Coburn and Dr. Joe Crank, in addition to Dr. Harp, for their dedicated time and concern for me as a graduate student. Susan Biery, Humanities Bibliographer for the UNLV library, has been an invaluable help in my research, as a guide and as a provider of consolation and encouragement through the process of researching a subject with relatively little material. I would also like to thank my family and friends for putting up with my email detailing the whole process. My advanced-placement students at Cimarron-Memorial High School in northwest Las Vegas have also been patient, concerned and awed as they listened to my excuses for not quite having their essays graded yet. Finally, I would like to thank my boyfriend, Eric Dobbs, for being a wonderful source of comfort and love this year.
CHRONOLOGY

1912 Mary Lavin is born on June 11 in East Walpole, Massachusetts, the only child of Tom Lavin and Nora Mahon Lavin.

1921 Nora Lavin leaves America to return to Ireland with Mary. They live with the Mahons in Aherney.

1922 Tom Lavin joins his family in Dublin, where Nora had purchased a house with money Tom sent her. Mary attends the Loreto Convent school.

1926 Tom Lavin is appointed the manager of the Birds' estate, Bective House, in County Meath.

1930 Mary Lavin enrolls at University College, Dublin.

1937 Mary Lavin's M.A. thesis on the novel and Jane Austen is accepted with honors at UCD. She visits the United States with her father and writes her first short story, "Miss Holland."

1938 Mary Lavin teaches French at the Loreto school for two years, while she works on her Ph.D., featuring a dissertation on Virginia Woolf. She never completed this degree.

1939 "Miss Holland" was accepted by editor Seumas O'Sullivan and is published in the April-June 1939 issue of Dublin Magazine.

1940 "The Green Grave and The Black Grave" is published in the Atlantic Monthly, marking the first appearance of her work in America.

1942 Mary Lavin marries William Walsh. Also in this year, she published her first collection of short stories, Tales from Bective Bridge.

1943 This year is marked not only by the birth of her first child, Valentine, but also by her first literary award, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, for Tales from Bective Bridge.
1944 *The Long Ago and Other Stories* is published. The serialization of *Gabriel Galloway* (the early title of her novel *The House in Clewe Street*) begins in the *Atlantic Monthly*.

1945 Tom Lavin dies, but Mary gives birth to her second daughter, Elizabeth. Mary and William Walsh buy a farm at Bective with Mary's inheritance.

1946 *The Becker Wives and Other Stories* is published.

1947 *At Sallygap and Other Stories* is published.

1950 Publication of *Mary O'Grady*, Mary Lavin's second and final novel.

1951 *A Single Lady and Other Stories* is published.

1953 Caroline, Mary Lavin's third daughter is born, but William Walsh becomes seriously ill and withdraws his candidacy for the Dail Eireann.

1954 William Walsh dies.

1956 Publication of *The Patriot Son and Other Stories*.


1958 This year marks Mary's twenty-year stint as a regular contributor to the *New Yorker*, with the publication of "The Living."

1959 Mary Lavin receives her first Guggenheim award, which is renewed for 1960-61. Publication of *Selected Stories*.

1961 Mary Lavin is awarded the Katherine Mansfield Prize for "The Great Wave."

1964 Publication of *The Stories of Mary Lavin*.

1967 Mary Lavin becomes a writer-in-residence at the University of Connecticut, Storrs, a position she returns to in 1971. Publication of "In the Middle of the Fields."

1968 University College, Dublin bestows an Honorary Doctorate of Literature.

1969 Mary Lavin marries Michael McDonald Scott after he leaves the Jesuit Order. Publication of *Happiness and Other Stories*. Also in this year, Nora Lavin dies.
1971 Mary Lavin becomes president of the Irish Academy of Writers. *Collected Stories* is published.

1972 *The Second Best Children in the World* is published. Lavin receives the Ella Lynam Cabot Award.

1973 Publication of *A Memory and Other Stories*.

1975 Lavin is awarded the Eire Society Medal and the Gregory Medal. Zack Bowen writes her first biography.

1978 Richard Peterson writes a second biography of Mary Lavin, which is the last to date.

1990 Death of Michael McDonald Scott. In her declining years after Michael’s death, Mary Lavin moved into a nursing home in Dublin.

1996 Mary Lavin dies on March 26 in her Dublin nursing home at the age of 83.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In his 1975 biography of Mary Lavin, Zack Bowen suggests that Lavin’s short story “Happiness” is the one that most parallels her life. In this story, a widowed mother of three lives in County Meath, Ireland, and has befriended a priest. The story explores the mother, Vera Traske, assessing her approach to life all of the way through to its end. Likewise, Lavin lived in County Meath and was the widowed mother of three, and she eventually remarried a man who left the priesthood. The narrator of “Happiness” is one of the daughters, who, in reference to her mother, declares in the story’s first paragraph that “Her theme was happiness; what it was, what it was not; where we might find it, where not; and how, if found, it must be guarded.” 1 Bowen concludes that this theme was also Lavin’s, for her life and for her fiction. This struggle for happiness is the common thread woven throughout Lavin’s fiction, binding her stories into a tapestry reflecting the human need to define, find and guard happiness. And, this struggle usually occurs within the context of the social unit in which most people mean to find happiness: the family. Lavin’s tapestry is not a portrait of individuals, then, but it is a family portrait, which she paints over from new angles and in new light and from every perspective in the long view of her fiction.

Lavin lets each character in the portrait have his or her turn in the spotlight: wives, husbands, daughters and sons. The domestic dynamics of their world is colored by the more harsh realities of early twentieth-century Irish society: the Victorian expectations of traditional gender roles, a rigid social caste system, and, at times,
misguided religion, which can cast a dim shadow on the world around them. The scholars who know her work agree that the world reflected by her fiction is one in which the "rules are Victorian, mean, and all-pervasive. There is no mercy for those who violate them, attempt to evade them, or have pretensions above their station."^ However, Lavin’s commentary on this world is multi-faceted, and she gives voice to wives of every hue, to husbands equally as hemmed in by social expectations, and to daughters testing these boundaries. The inner lives of sons are dimmer by comparison, but they do exist in this portrait, mostly, though not exclusively, as the litmus paper by which mothers and daughters are testing and perhaps challenging their place within the social frame. It is the purpose of this study to examine the members of Lavin’s family portrait in every light, and to determine whether they do or can find happiness through exercising personal conscience within the framework of carefully defined roles in a society that, according to Lavin, colored only within the lines.

NOTES

CHAPTER 2

MARY LAVIN: PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST

Mary Lavin’s personal portrait is as multi-faceted as the fiction she wrote. In a career that spanned over fifty years, she was an award-winning author, an artist who produced fiction that has been compared with the work of her fellow Irishmen Frank O’Connor, Sean O’Faolain, Liam O’Flaherty and Elizabeth Bowen. Her short stories appeared in the top magazines in America and Ireland, including the New Yorker, the Atlantic Monthly, and Dublin Magazine, and she won at least nine major literary awards, including several Guggenheim Fellowships and the Katherine Mansfield Prize. She published nineteen books, comprised of collections of over one hundred short stories, two novels and even stories for children. She also published a serialized novel, several poems and some non-fiction. By the standards of her day for a serious fiction writer, especially one whose best work was done in the short story medium, she was a professional success.

She did not, however, need to find that success through living the life of a modern Irish writer according to the “gospel of James Joyce.” In other words, she did not need to leave mother Ireland in order to be able to write passionately and with vision about the inner lives of her people. The overall patina of her writing, in fact, is not particularly Irish. Lavin herself said that “since she lived in Ireland most of her life, her raw material was Irish, but...‘Anything I wanted to achieve was in the traditions of world literature. I did not read the Irish writers until I had already dedicated myself to the short story...’”1
The generation of writers that had preceded Lavin were mostly products of the Gaelic Revival and the Irish Literary Renaissance, both of which blossomed in the years before and after the Irish Revolution and the establishment of the Free State in 1922. Contributors to the Irish Literary Renaissance, such as William Butler Yeats, Edward Martyn, and George Moore, were heavily influenced by Europe and were more cosmopolitan. The Gaelic Revivalists were nationalistic in tenor and called for a deanglicization of Ireland and sought to bring back the old Celtic myths, language and other influences. Lavin could not have helped being influenced some by these movements as she grew up, but she was part of the next generation, and she took her own path to establish a voice all of her own for her fiction, drawing from the wide-range of world literature that she studied in her formal education. A deeper look into her portrait will reveal that the intensity and truth of her fiction come, not so much from an agenda of the exterior world, but from the facets that are cut inwardly. Her characters and themes are ones that a person, of any nationality or gender, can recognize with the eyes of the heart—they ring true with his or her own private experiences in the world.

Lavin’s childhood and adolescence were largely formed by the contrasting natures of her parents, which contributed to how families would be depicted in her fiction later. Her working-class father, Tom Lavin, left Roscommon, Ireland for a better life in America and was employed as a horse groom, chauffeur, and general caretaker by the Birds, a wealthy American family who lived in East Walpole, Massachusetts. Tom Lavin met Mary’s mother, Nora Mahon, after she visited East Walpole, where her grand-uncle James Dermody was a parish priest. Nora was the daughter of a successful, middle-class merchant in Athenry, County Galway, but as there were twelve children in her family, she was sent to America in hopes that she might marry and stay there. Nora disliked America and never intended to return when she left. However, Tom Lavin, who was on a business trip to buy horses for his employers, was on the boat that returned her to Ireland. After they met, Tom corresponded with her for three years, until she was
convinced to go to Boston to marry him. Despite her dislike of America and her middle-class condescension toward "Tom's ways," 3 Nora lived there with him for ten years.

Mary was born on June 11, 1912, but by the time she was nine years old, her mother returned to Ireland permanently. At first Mary and her mother lived in Atherny with the Mahon's. Apparently, the eight months she spent in Atherny greatly impressed Mary's sensibilities, because she often revisited Atherny, at least as an abstraction, in her fiction. She said many years later that "For years whenever I wrote a story, no matter what gave me the idea, I recast it in terms of the people of that town." 4

One year after Nora left America, Tom joined his family in Dublin and they bought a house. Mary went to school at the Loreto convent in Dublin, where she developed a love for literature, debate, plays and the poems of Longfellow. In 1926, Tom Lavin accepted a position as the manager of Mr. Bird's estate in Bective, County Meath. In addition to her parents, Atherny and the Loreto convent, Bective became another important influence in Mary's life. Peterson writes that "By the time she finished her school years at Loreto and began her career at University College, Dublin, in 1930, she had gathered in her imagination and heart much of the material that would later be transformed into the characters and settings of her fiction." 5

Lavin's early observations of her parent's relationship are the backdrop for her short story "Tom" (1973), which is said to reflect the "emotional climate" of her parents' marriage. "What emerges from the story is the portrait of a mixed match, a 'romantic, but not happy marriage' distinguished by the fact that the couple 'kept faith with each other.'" 6 Mary seems to have admired her father, who adored her, and he has been positively reflected in her stories. Her mother, however, is reflected in women of refinement who shrink from the realities of life, and are often the rivals rather than the nurturers of her children. In fact, the various aspects of Nora appear to be the basis of
many wives in Lavin’s fiction, such as Ella in “A Happy Death” and Annie in “At Sallygap.”

However, Mary Lavin’s own adult experiences as a wife and mother contribute as much to her depictions of husbands and wives in her later fiction as did the experiences of her parents in her earlier fiction. Not all of the mothers are like hers, nor are all of the fathers. In fact, Lavin seems to have achieved an overall even-handedness as a chronicler of human nature. It is true that she had periods in which she tended toward one kind of character as compared with another, but in the total picture of her work that spanned fifty years, a thorough examination of all kinds of wives and husbands is achieved, both of which will be explored in subsequent chapters.

After earning first honors in English and second honors in French at University College in Dublin, she went on to pursue her master’s degree and submitted a thesis on Jane Austen in 1936. Her father, always the balance to her academic nature, took her away on a visit to America, and she left her thesis manuscript to be typed and turned in by a friend. Her professor could not decide whether it deserved honors or a failure because of how badly it was edited, so he had an outside examiner read it who recognized the merit of Lavin’s work and gave it first-class honors. And, despite her father frequently distracting her from her academic career, Lavin began work on her Ph.D. while she taught French at the Loreto convent for two years. She did not complete the degree. However, she did receive an Honorary Doctorate of Literature from the University in 1968.

While at college, Lavin met a young man named Michael Scott, with whom she grew very close; however, he was called to the priesthood, and it wasn’t until 1942 that Lavin married another man, William Walsh, whom she had also met at college. Walsh had become a lawyer and began a practice in Dublin. Over the next ten years, Lavin gave birth to three daughters. Although her father died in 1945, Lavin did not begin the real hardships of her own life until 1954, when William Walsh died, leaving her with three
children to rear alone. With money left her by her father, Lavin had purchased the Abbey Farm in Bective, which left her with a home base and an income from the farm after the loss of her husband, but it was with the advent of true grief and financial difficulties that Lavin deepened the personal well from which she drew the substance of her characters' suffering. The reality of her earliest stories had been mostly based on her keen intuition and her imagination, but her later fiction is more autobiographical, particularly characterized by her stories about lonely widows and their search for independence and self-identity.

In 1969, Lavin was relieved from her long years of widowhood when she married Michael Scott McDonald, her long-time friend from university who decided to leave the Jesuit Order to marry her. They lived together in Bective and in Dublin until McDonald died in 1990. Lavin herself spent her final few years in a nursing home and died on March 26, 1996, at the age of 83. Her three daughters still survive her.

The emotional structures of Lavin's personal world were formed by an amalgam of contrasting influences. While she did have times of joy and stability, she also saw much in her personal pain and in the dark side of her society to comment upon in her fiction. Her parents were from separate social classes, which is often fuel for a writer's commentary; she had experiences outside of Ireland in America, which may have made her a more objective observer of her world; she loved Ireland in the city and in the country, which gives the social world of her stories varied contexts; she possessed exceptional academic and artistic talent, which gave her a concrete outlet for her keen awareness; and she experienced marriage, motherhood, and loss through death, which are all universal human events. This combination of influences and personal suffering contributed both to her often dark view of reality and to her ability to reflect the truth of experience in her fiction. In Zack Bowen's biography of Lavin, which is based on personal interviews with her, he writes:
Given Mary Lavin’s lifelong concern with practicalities, money problems, responsibilities, and the effects of death, her vision of reality is harsh and closely circumscribed by an acute awareness of social class, and society’s sanctions and rules. This is more than merely the theme of some of her stories; it is the donnée of her plots as well as the context of motive and constraint which condition the behavior of most of her characters. In the tightly controlled, sometimes fatalistic sphere in which her characters live, many of them succumb to a life of quiet frustration or desperation, while others try to escape, to rationalize, to hide, or to seek freedom through love, nature, insanity or death.  

In depicting the truth of experience, Lavin often concentrates on the negative consequences of a character’s choices, and so character, rather than plot drives the grim moral atmosphere of her fictional world in the best of her stories. Rarely do Lavin’s characters reach the epiphany needed to escape a fatalistic life of quiet frustration or desperation. They are confronted with decisions to make within their religious and social context, but most of the people in her stories fail to make healthy decisions, which is sometimes precisely because the character is, as described above, “circumscribed by an acute awareness of social class, and society’s sanctions and rules.” For example, in “A Happy Death,” generally agreed upon by Lavin scholars as her finest story, Ella cannot reach out beyond her own misguided view of the world in order to show compassion to her husband, because she is caught in a web of social expectations that formed her view of the world in the first place. Ella’s spiritual deprivation is counter-acted, however, by her husband, who genuinely loves his wife until the end. In Robert, we see an example of the charity that a soul under pressure can produce.

Almost all of Lavin’s characters feel a smoldering longing for fulfillment, whether it is after a long struggle to find happiness or whether it is the more hopeful striving of a young person just starting out. Most often, this longing for personal fulfillment is left unidentified or misinterpreted as the need for something else, such as social status, wealth or religious vocation, and it is this failure to be aware of his or her real needs that causes them to seek fulfillment in places where it cannot be found. They made the wrong choices, and they must live with the consequences in what Bowen calls
their “tightly controlled, sometimes fatalistic sphere.” Lavin believes that it is within the realm of this very private struggle that the essence of morality exists. Her concern is that a character acts according to his or her conscience, when faced with religious, moral or romantic issues. As she concludes her story “The Widow’s Son”:

Perhaps all our actions have this double quality about them; this possibility of alternative, and that it is only by careful watching, and absolute sincerity that we follow the path that is ordained for us, and, no matter how tragic that may be, it is better than the tragedy we bring upon ourselves.8

Maurice Harmon, in his article “Mary Lavin: Moralist of the Heart,” explicates these statements with the following comments:

‘Careful watching’ and ‘absolute sincerity.’ On reflection we might see these as comments on all those who fail to act in accordance with private conscience, all those failures brought about by self-deception, wishful-thinking, evasion or a too easy dependence on others...For it is the essence of a Mary Lavin character that life provides almost endless opportunities for choice and consequently for evasion. This standard of judgment is the honesty with which the choice is made. ‘Careful watching’ and a rigorous habit of sincerity are required. It is also fundamental to her method of characterization that the individual character has the capacity for myriad decisions and indecisions.9

Although Lavin’s characters often make the wrong decisions, it is important to her that they have alternatives to choose from. Given her often negative view of the closely-controlled Irish society that mandates religious, political and gender roles for both men and women, she wants to explore all of the outcomes that could occur based on choices made within this controlled environment. As Harmon has identified, it is these “endless opportunities for choice and...for evasion” that gives Lavin’s fiction an overall balance. She does not depict characters all in one light. Women are not always victims and the men are not always the oppressors, nor is the church always an oppressor, though it is sometimes so. It is Lavin’s desire to explore a “myriad decisions and indecisions,” as Harmon indicated. It is in this complexity and richness that lies the importance of her
work for the literary canon of the twentieth century. The scope of her appeal is universal; she is not a woman writer, but a writer who attempts a reflection of all experiences, whether they are male or female. In fact, it has been determined that forty percent of her main characters are male. It is difficult to point to an example of a significant twentieth-century male writer whose main characters or narrators are forty percent female. It may be because of her universal appeal that Lavin has been passed over in recent years by major critical works on women writers. She is a faithful observer of all human experience, regardless of gender, which has not always been an approach popular with the women’s movement in the past twenty years. Patricia Meszaros, in her 1982 article “Woman as Artist: The Fiction of Mary Lavin,” writes that “Lavin is not a feminist in the contemporary sense; she is a ‘quiet rebel,’ who prefers to take an ironic stance, like Jane Austen, directing her detached gaze upon the foibles of men and women alike.”

And it is true that she does this with an oblique artistic style and with the subtlety of her Victorian-minded generation, and not with the brazen openness of a post-sexual revolution woman whose chief concern is a one-sided depiction of women, leaving out a place for masculine perspective.

Lavin’s desire for balance is not only evidenced in the even-handedness with which she addresses the genders, but it is also evidenced in the plot structures of some of her stories. For example, two of her stories, “My Vocation” and “Chamois Gloves,” explore two different outcomes to the same challenge. The main characters in both stories are young women who are faced with a choice and are given the option to make a decision to be true to her conscience. In the case of these two stories, the girls must make a choice for or against a call to the church. In “Chamois Gloves,” the young girl does go into the church for spiritual reasons and must come to terms with the seriousness of her commitment. On the other hand, the young girl in “My Vocation” realizes that she had the wrong motives before she goes into the church, and so decides on marriage instead. Both characters must make the same decision, but two different outcomes are explored.
Lavin’s greatest talent lies in the search for honesty, which can thereby lead to happiness. Happiness is found in being true to oneself; it is not found in blindly accepting society’s expectations, whether it is gender-centric, nationalistic, religious or social in scope. Lavin’s message is one in which the individual must be responsible to him or herself first, before he or she can make any kinds of commitments to human institutions, including marriage and the church. She does accept that commitment to established social institutions is an option, but it must be taken seriously and a person must act according to the dictates of his or her conscience. Otherwise, happiness cannot be found.

Despite her lifelong love of literature and her formal training in it, Lavin did not begin her artistic life as a writer until 1938. And, although her personal life greatly influenced her work, she saw herself as a writer first, while her duties as wife and mother were actually an adjunct to her profession, unlike most of the Irish women of her generation. In fact, Lavin said that she “believed that writing was her life and the rest only an echo.” She wrote her first story, “Miss Holland,” after she realized that one of the writers she most admired, Virginia Woolf, was still alive and still writing. She was stirred to action after she “made the connection between the work and the hand that wrote it.”

“Miss Holland” was rejected by several magazines, but editor Seamus O’Sullivan was responsible for publishing the story in the April-June issue of *Dublin Magazine* in 1939. However, it was Lord Edward Dunsany who became her most influential mentor. “He became a great admirer of Mary Lavin’s stories, comparing their truthfulness to the realism of Russian fiction.” He brought her stories to the attention of editors and brought her work to America. He also wrote the preface for and advised her on the arrangement of the stories for her first collection of short stories, *Tales from Bective Bridge*, which was published in 1942. Dunsany’s only criticism of her fiction was that it often lacked plot, as her stories are mostly driven by character, but otherwise he said that
he had nothing else to teach her about fiction. He wrote in his preface to *Tales from Bective Bridge* that his “only function was to stand as it were, at the portals of this book to point within to what you may find for yourselves, and to recommend you to look for it.”

Lavin’s fifty-year writing career has been broken into four periods and divisions by Richard Peterson in the first and still the only full-length study of her fiction, which he wrote in 1978 with contributions by Lavin herself. He divides her work into “The Early Stories,” “The Novels,” “The Middle Period (or Stories with a Pattern),” and “The Later Fiction.” It is not the purpose of this study to delineate these periods in depth, but to point out that, although her work was focused a little differently in each period, she had developed an overall approach to her fiction early on that she basically stayed with throughout her career. The essence to her approach is succinctly stated by Peterson when he writes that “...Mary Lavin wrote stories carefully designed to allow the reader to experience the emotional reality of her character’s lives.” Most of her early and later stories do lack the punch of the conventional plot, which was Lord Dunsany’s only mild criticism of her. But Lavin was “fully aware of the objections to one kind of story that she was writing.”

It was not Lavin’s purpose merely to satisfy her audience’s desire for shallow entertainment—she wanted to reflect life. In fact, she wrote “A Story with A Pattern” very early in her career, which lays out the intentions of her fiction. In the story, a male mentor gives advice to his female protegé, not unlike the relationship Lavin had with Lord Dunsany. The man tells her that her stories will not appeal to men, because they do not have enough substance. The young lady’s argument in reply sums up Lavin’s approach to fiction:

She defends her stories by pointing out that life has little plot and tends to break off in the middle; but he argues that the reader expects the writer to offer a diversion from life’s chaos by revealing some purpose to a story, some relation between cause and effect...
[She explains again that] she won’t always find stories like that to
tell...Life in general isn’t rounded off like that at the edges; into
neat shapes. Life is chaotic; its events are unrelated...The
exasperated gentleman can only ask her to refrain from stating
‘that nonsense again’. To prevent any further possibility, he
casually walks away. 18

In this exchange we see classic miscommunication between the sexes, which
often lies at the crux of the tensions between husbands and wives in Lavin’s stories. He
does not understand that her stories really do have plot and substance, but they are driven
by the emotional, inner lives of mostly introverted characters—which is often a world
skirted by men. Likewise, she does not know how to express this in terms that he can
understand. This disparity in communication—this failure to understand the purposes of
the heart between the sexes, between the church and the lay person, between parents and
children—is what causes people conflict. These are Lavin’s plot conflicts, and the plot
climaxes and denouements of these stories stem from the resolution (or non-resolution)
of these inner conflicts, which are often governed by the choices a character makes in the
context of his or her societal, religious or gender role on his or her path to happiness.

Another element that the man in “A Story with a Pattern” may be failing to
recognize is the type of subtlety of which Lavin is a master. In fact, Janet Egleson
Dunleavy has identified Lavin as a satirist. After all, Lavin wrote her master’s thesis on
Jane Austen. It would be natural to find this influence in her work. In fact, many of
Lavin’s stories are riddled with an undercurrent of ironic humor. Dunleavy wrote that
“raw truth is again the chief ingredient of the satire, but it is served chilled, in small
portions, rather than in a cauldron, blistering hot. Its effect is achieved less through
public humiliation, more through personal discomfort.” 19 There is no doubt that Lavin’s
characters almost universally experience personal discomfort when faced with conflict. If
the character can resolve the conflict, he or she discovers happiness. If not, he or she is
left living the life of “quiet desperation” that Bowen describes.
"The Long Holidays" is a prime example of the satirical Lavin story. A tiny woman fittingly named Dolly was married a little later in life than she should have been to the Major, who was the only man who ever made her an offer. Most of the women Dolly knew assumed that she had "deliberately" never gotten married because of her diminutive size. The implication was of course that she was not especially fit for sex and child-bearing. Nevertheless, Dolly wants to be a fit mother to her new, teenage step-son, Vinnie. Vinnie is away at school, and so she does not meet him until months after the wedding. When Dolly does finally meet him, he is a large, oafish half-man who muddies her floors with his boots. The first and final nail in the coffin of Dolly's attempt at motherhood is driven in as early as Vinnie's welcome-home dinner. Dolly notices that Vinnie has warts on his hands. She offers to send him to the doctor to have them taken off, but Vinnie informs her that she needn't waste her money. He can have them off at school by a boy who will do it if Vinnie will do his sums for a week. This is the climax of the story:

In spite of herself, Dolly was interested.
‘How does he do it?’ she asked, as she took up her fork again.
Vinnie looked surprised that she should have to be told.
‘Bites them off—how else do you think?’ he asked, and then he looked at the Major. ‘What’s the matter with her?’ he demanded.
For Dolly had rushed from the room.20

Dolly represents the type of woman Lavin enjoys satirizing. She is small, frail and the opposite of a natural, earthy mother. Her pettiness and squeamishness are antithetical to motherhood. The image of the mother and society’s expectations for this role is an important theme in Lavin’s fiction. Some of Lavin’s female characters are so frail that they cannot even conceive, like Flora in The Becker Wives. These characters are usually viewed in an unfavorable light. Other Lavin mother figures can conceive, but they are emotionally frail and find pregnancy and child-bearing a shameful burden. Mrs. Kedrigan, in “Sarah,” and Bedelia in the Grimes family stories are prime examples. The
most likeable and strongest mothers in Lavin’s stories are closer to the earth and to the
natural aspects of love, marriage and child-bearing. Typical of Lavin, she explores both
positive and negative aspects of her subject, creating a well-rounded picture of
motherhood throughout the span of her work. Although mothers are strong and important
characters in Lavin’s family portrait, the length of this study will not allow for an
in-depth exploration of these characters—although it does include mentions of wives in
their roles as mothers. The chapter on wives took precedence, mostly to include Lavin’s
most finely-crafted and moving story, “A Happy Death,” which revolves around the
relationship of a wife to her husband.

In Lavin’s approach to fiction, she achieves a wide-range of goals. She creates a
sensitive, insightful and complex emotional world in which her characters can play out
their roles in the family as they are influenced on their path to happiness by the church,
by society and by gender role expectations. At the same time, she should also be
recognized as a satirist, who is a keen observer and recorder of the follies of humans who
act and make choices within the societal and familial institutions that they have inherited.
Mary Lavin should be appreciated for her subtlety, complexity, artistic technique, “quiet
rebellion” against the crueler aspects of social and religious institutions, and for her
open-mindedness toward all kinds of human experiences, regardless of gender. Her
achievements as an artist may eventually emerge as significant to the twentieth-century
canon of literature.
NOTES

3 Peterson, 17.
5 Peterson, 19.
6 Ibid, 16.
7 Bowen, 15.
9 Ibid, 114.
12 Peterson, 22.
14 Ibid, 21.
16 Ibid, 76.
17 Ibid, 78.
18 Peterson, 77.
19 Dunleavy, 72.
CHAPTER 3

WIVES

For Lavin, the ideal in marriage is to find both physical love and true companionship. There is evidence that Lavin herself found this kind of fulfillment in both of her marriages. A.A. Kelly, in *Mary Lavin: Quiet Rebel*, describes the healthy marriage according to Lavin’s ideals: "For the mature couple companionship and love are inextricably interwoven and their dependency must be mutual. The sexual side gives external expression to the quality of love which pre-exists and surpasses it. This is again a question of holding in balance the inner reality of love and its outward manifestation."  

For Lavin, it is this balance between physical and emotional compatibility that holds a healthy relationship intact. However, Lavin’s fiction predominately explores the reality of unhealthy marriages and the unhappiness that results when one of these healthy elements is absent or out of balance.

The almost impossible expectations of gender roles are often a barrier to finding happiness for both the male and the female characters. Both genders have been indoctrinated in the strictures of their roles by the Victorian rules that pervaded Irish society early in this century. The men were expected to provide for and to protect their families, and they must keep their manly dignity as the head of the household. The women must be pious, motherly, obedient to their husbands; they must seek social advancement, and keep up appearances for society and for their children. The social conventions, rather than deep, personal fulfillment, become the rubric for measuring
conflict enters the scene when a spouse falls short of them. This is the basis of the conflict between Ella and Robert in "A Happy Death," which will be discussed below. Lavin recognizes that real people are much more complex than social stereotypes, and so she shines her spotlight on the dark corners of marriage in order to bring to light the places where people are glaringly unforgiving of their partners when he or she falls short of the stereotype.

Many of the wives depicted in Lavin's stories are misguided, especially in her early work, which may have been based on her observations of her mother. These wives place a value on everything else but simple love, and are often very demanding of their husbands to meet the standards of their gender roles. When these wives are disappointed, they replace love with external concerns. "The lack of happiness shown by so many of [Lavin's] women characters is because they become entangled in a web of social convention and material detail which love's radiance cannot penetrate." In fact, true love in Lavin's stories is rare. Her depictions of marriage can even be described as cynical—seen as "an escape, a convention or a convenience." Perhaps Lavin's cynical treatment of marriage is an indictment, not necessarily of the institution itself, but of how badly people have been prepared for love by the demanding Victorian society Lavin reflects in her fiction.

In "A Happy Death," Lavin depicts a wife who is completely caught up in the trap of gender role expectations, and she is bitterly disappointed when they are not met by her husband. She is very misguided and shallow, thinking that a successful marriage is one in which the appearances and material details were just right. In fact, the young Ella had eloped with Robert against her mother's wishes precisely because he looked good. "He wore white shirts and white collars, and they were dazzlingly white, and his clothes were always brushed and pressed, with creases in them as sharp as the blades of a knife. And his shoes were always shining. You could see yourself in his shoes." Not only did Robert look good, he sat around on the town wall or in the meadow reading
poetry. Of course, Ella’s mother had no use for a delicate, pale young man who sat
around reading poetry—especially one who had no money. But, Ella was convinced that it
was these appearances and the poetry, which she had no real interest in herself, that set
Robert apart from the rest of the hairy, dirty men with warts who populated the town.
Ella wanted society to see that she was set apart from the rest through her husband’s
external image. Ella’s mother, however, set the standard for what her society saw as the
ideal gender role for a strong male—he was to be ruddy, muscular, and thick-set with hair
on his chest. This was a man made for hard work to provide properly for a family. Later,
when Ella is disappointed in Robert’s failure to deliver the refined lifestyle she expected,
she recalls her mother’s opinion:

Why! her own mother had been able to see clearly what would happen. That was
why her mother had been so dead set against the marriage. Her mother had seen
what she was too blind to see, that the very things that attracted her to him were
the things that would have made another girl cautious. She loved his white skin
that was as fine as a girl’s. How did she know it would get sickly and yellow? She
loved the way the blue veins showed in his white hands. How was she to know
that was a sign of delicacy? And, one summer, when he was swimming in the
river outside the town, she had come upon the riverbank suddenly and seen his
white body, hairless and smooth, flashing through the heavy river water. How was
she to know that hair on a man’s body was a sign of strength, and that only a
foolish ignorant girl would disgust to it? She knew nothing, it seemed, in those
days. 5

Robert did turn out to be sickly with consumption, and not a very successful
provider for the family. Ella was pleased when he took a position at the lending library.
She felt that this had an appearance of respectability, but eventually Robert’s coughing
became so bad that he was placed downstairs as a porter. Ella became disgusted with this
demotion. Robert was determined to maintain his manly dignity by bringing in an
income, but Ella, with her usual lack of true understanding, had rather stay home and
sit on the front porch in a new suit to give their home, which by now she had turned into
a boarding house, an external appearance of refinement. Robert refused her request to
stay at home and he kept going out to work—he had to hold on to the small shreds of
self-respect that he had left. Ella was bitter because she took on the unnatural role, according to usual expectations, of the major breadwinner for the family; she earned more with renting one room than Robert brought home from his job. But, what bothered her most was that Robert had lost his fine appearance over the years:

Why! the welts on her own hands sometimes now after scrubbing down the whole house, were as bad as warts any day. But there again, she didn’t mind that. All she minded was for the way he had broken down himself. It was for that she blamed him. She had been so proud of him. She would have worn herself to the bone working for him if he had kept his looks and stayed the way he was back home when she used to steal out of the house and meet him in the Long Meadow back of the churchyard.6

It may have been natural for Ella to be disappointed in Robert’s inability to fulfill the traditional male gender role, given the ideals of her society. But, her character is especially shallow when she bases the entire value of her marriage on Robert’s physical appearance—a commodity which will break down in everyone as they age. Although the story is mainly related through Ella’s feelings, there is an undercurrent of Robert’s intentions.

Indeed, the ironic ending of this story lies within Robert’s own misunderstanding of his wife. Finally he is so sickly, after twenty years of an unfulfilled marriage and life with a bitter, unsympathetic wife, that he goes into the hospital to die. Ella refuses to recognize his illness all along, imagining it as just the way Robert was getting back at her. But, now that he is in the hospital, she is forced to recognize that he is dying. In keeping with her frantic concerns about appearances, she brings gifts, flowers and fruit everyday to Robert’s room so that people in the hospital will think that other people had sent them. The nurse attending Robert’s room points out that all of her efforts are pointless, because what he really needs is a happy death. What the nurse means by this is that she hopes that Robert will regain consciousness in time to confess himself to a priest, receive absolution and be guaranteed a place in heaven. Again, Ella misses the point of even such a basic principle as this. Instead of genuinely hoping that Robert dies
at peace with God, she becomes obsessed with providing him with a priest in time, so that other people will not think that he died as an unconfessed sinner.

Robert does regain consciousness, but he misunderstands Ella’s words, when she asks him to repeat his final confession. He hears the word “sorry” from Ella’s mouth, and he thinks that she is sorry for all of the pain she put him through. He becomes delirious, but being near death, he bares his heart to her. Even before he went into the hospital, he cried that there were strangers everywhere, revealing that he resented Ella’s boarders and that they never were really able to be alone together at peace, as he had imagined they would be. He even refuses to recognize his three daughters, whom he also resented for taking away time with his wife—he truly did love her all of those years. In reply to what Robert thinks is an apology from his wife, he says:

Sorry?...There’s nothing to be sorry about, my darling...We were unfortunate, that was all. It wasn’t your fault. I wasn’t much good. That was the trouble. I should never have taken you from your comfortable home. I’m the one who should be sorry, not you...But I’m not sorry...You were all I wanted in the whole world. When I had you I had everything. Even when you spoke harshly to me, I knew it was because you were tired. I knew that I had failed you, and I always forgave you...You always made me happy, just by being near me. Just to look at you made my heart brighter. Always. Always. It was always like that.

As Ella listened to the speech above, and others full of love and a longing for the past happiness that they had briefly shared in their youth, she begins to sob, suggesting that she felt some remorse. However, Ella ultimately fails to understand her husband, which would have provided him with a truly happy death. She runs from the room screaming, when she realizes that he is dead and that he did not confess to the priest. Her final worry is that God had not heard her prayers for Robert to confess. The irony, of course, is that Robert thinks that Ella had finally had some genuine feeling of love and sympathy for him through an apology, but she is just as she ever was, concerned only with shallow appearances and her own selfish disappointment that God had not heard her prayers. Fortunately for Robert, he perceives his death as happy because he takes with
him some tenderness from his wife, even though these were not her intentions. Robert
dies happy, but Ella remains unchanged. Peterson comments on “A Happy Death” in his
biography:

    The climax of “A Happy Death” once again stresses Mary Lavin’s basic theme
    that individuals of radically different interests and sensibilities rarely achieve
    even a simple, momentary understanding of each other’s needs...the best hopes
    for happiness are crushed by the failure of the individual to rise above his own
    narrow desires and understand the emotional needs of another human being.⁸

    Further, the failure of Ella’s and Robert’s marriage is based on disappointment
that both were unable to fulfill the ideal gender roles. Ella had expected Robert to
provide her with a prosperous and refined life. Instead, she became a slave to hard labor
taking care of a boarding house and raising her children. Robert had expected Ella to be a
loving wife, who supported him for better or worse. “Their tragedy arises from their
inabilities to live according to the realities of their situation.”⁹ Both were disillusioned by
a romantic ideal, which was not based in reality, but in the demands of unrealistic gender
role expectations. Robert did finally find happiness, albeit it through self-delusion before
his death. Ella, however, did not find happiness, nor would she ever find it without
removing her own blinders of selfish shallowness.

    This story is very long and multi-layered. There are many other points that could
be examined, such as the artist’s place (represented by Robert’s poetry) in the world
versus reality of the work-a-day world. This is a common Lavin theme. It would also be
interesting to explore Lavin’s depiction of Catholicism surrounding Robert’s death and
his lack of confession. Her point may be that it would have been even better in God’s
eyes for husband and wife to reconcile in a genuine manner than for Robert to receive a
conscious absolution by a priest. However, an even greater appreciation of the full
richness of this story might be missed if a brief examination of Lavin’s craftsmanship is
left out.

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Lavin is a master of using shifts backwards and forwards in time to unfold her story. This not only serves as a framework for the narrative structure of "A Happy Death," but it also echoes Ella’s and Robert’s obsession with the past and with memory. The story is constructed so that we see the consequences of Ella’s life with Robert first, and then the causes for it are revealed through Ella’s memories and through Robert’s actions and final “confession” to his wife. We will examine the opening scene of the story in order to highlight Lavin’s mastery of detail and use of time to construct her complex narrative.

The opening scene of the story depicts the depths to which Ella’s and Robert’s family has fallen. Details of uncouthness and a ramshackle household set the stage for the dreariness and the drudgery that Ella feels she has been subjected to.

It was the custom of the household to eliminate footsteps whenever possible by carrying on conversations from room to room, and even, as in this case, from one landing to another, but the lodger in the lower-front room...had not gone out.that day, and it was in deference to the unusual presence by daytime of a stranger in the house that the woman came out to lean over the banister.10

Any pretenses of polite society are conspicuously absent, with people shouting to one another throughout the house. There is also mention of a lodger—one of the strangers to which Robert had felt he had sacrificed his privacy with his wife. Other details in the opening scene include coughing and moaning coming from the other room. Of course, it is Robert suffering from his illness, but he is only mentioned as “father,” while Ella is at first only referred to as “the woman” or as “mother.” Their names are not used until memories of their youth are introduced. The early narrative portion, in fact, focuses on “the failure of [the] marriage through the emotional burden it places upon Nonny, the youngest of three daughters. As Nonny struggles to attract her mother’s attention to her father’s coughing and moaning, she unwittingly draws out the bitter hostility Ella feels toward her husband.”11 It is clear that Nonny is frightened of her mother, and wishes that the warm, big-breasted female lodger would come to her rescue. This lodger serves as a
contrast to Ella’s obviously unmatronly and cold character. All of these details paint the picture of Ella’s emotional state not long before Robert’s decline into death. The reader is held in suspense as to why Ella’s life has come to such a pass. Lavin unfolds Ella’s misery through her memory and through her descriptions of the house and slime-covered garden that had once been clean and given both her and Robert pleasure. The garden represents how their relationship has deteriorated over the years. Again, Lavin masterfully uses these details which unfold gradually to create verisimilitude and to create a unified structure for the emotional truth and impact of her story. The narrative structure of “A Happy Death” would lend itself easily to a full-length study.

In the story “Brigid,” Lavin also features a wife concerned with external appearances. However, this story has a different ending. Again, these two stories have a similar theme, but the outcomes are different, reflecting Lavin’s evenhandedness in exploring the many choices available to people when confronted with similar conflicts on their paths to happiness.

“Brigid” opens with a soft rain falling down upon a small house in a grove of trees at the edge of a town. Inside the house, a husband and wife are having a petty argument. Throughout most of this story, as in “A Happy Death,” the husband and wife do not have names, but are simply called “the man” and “the woman.” The other characters do have names—Brigid is the man’s idiot sister, while their daughters are named Rosie and Mamie. Perhaps their lack of names elevates them just enough to become symbols of man and woman—husband and wife.

The man and the woman argue over the weather, and how he is stirring up ashes from the fire onto his dinner plate, which is filled with cabbage and potatoes. When he complains about the absence of meat, the argument takes a more serious turn, leading to the heart of the story’s conflict. The man says, “I suppose one of our fine daughters would think it the end of the world if she was asked to go for a bit of a message? Let me tell you, they’d get husbands for themselves quicker if they were seen doing a bit of work
once in a while.” The woman is insulted at this slight on her daughters, so she retaliates by blaming her husband for Rosie’s and Mamie’s situation, because he keeps his retarded sister in “a poke of a hut” at the back of their property. The woman insists that the outside world wants little to do with them or their daughters because of Brigid. She says, “Is any man going to marry a girl when he hears her aunt is a poor half-witted creature, soft in the head, and living in a poke of a hut, doing nothing all day but sitting looking into the fire?” The woman’s solution is to put Brigid in a home and out of sight.

The man reminds his wife that she did not put off marrying him because of Brigid; in fact, she used to feel sorry for Brigid, brought her flowers and said that she’d help look after her. Once the man and woman were married, however, it is revealed that the woman’s idea of looking after Brigid was to put her in a home. The man, who dearly loved his sister and had made a promise to his mother to keep her safe, refused to send Brigid away. Over the years, the wife began to resent Brigid—first, because she was an extra expense for the family, and then because she made them look strange in the eyes of the town. These are only the surface resentments. Her real resentment stemmed from the fact that her husband showed a genuine devotion to Brigid that he denied her. The balance of mutual love and dependency in the marital relationship never developed. The marriage was never fulfilling for either of them, because she was resentful and he was stubborn. They did not come to a stage of mutual understanding—they did not find happiness—before it was too late.

After the argument between the man and the woman, the man leaves the house to go sit with Brigid, as he often did, taking time away from his wife. He never returns to the house. Finally, the woman goes in search of him in Brigid’s cottage. Brigid can only communicate simplistically, which adds suspense to this scene. Brigid had told the man to go home. His name, Owen, is finally mentioned here, but only by his sister, with whom he had a very personal relationship. But, Brigid says, “He wouldn’t go home.” The woman, with difficulty, tries to find out her husband’s whereabouts, but still Brigid is
cryptic in her simple way. Finally, the woman says, “If he comes back, Brigid, tell him I
was here looking for him...I’ll go home through the other field.” Brigid replies with,
“Tell him yourself.” The scene and the story reach climax here:

‘Tell him yourself,’ said Brigid, and then she seemed to be talking to herself again. And she was leaning down in the dark before the
fire. ‘Why don’t you talk?’ she said. ‘Why don’t you talk.’

Owen’s wife began to pull out the old settle bed that was
in front of the fire not knowing why she did it, but she could feel
the blood pounding in her ears and behind her eyes.

‘He fell down and he wouldn’t get up!’ Brigid said. ‘I told
him to get up. I told him his head was getting scorched. But he
wouldn’t listen to me. He wouldn’t get up. He wouldn’t do anything.’

Owen’s wife closed her eyes. All of a sudden she was afraid
to look. But when she looked, Owen’s eyes stared up at her, wide
open, from where he lay on his back on the hearth.

After the argument with his wife, Owen had gone to Brigid, had a heart attack and
died, because Brigid did not know enough to pull him away from the fire. Owen’s wife
begins to scream when she feels his hot, blistered face, and she runs out of the house,
attracting people’s attention. It is through the circumstances of her husband’s death that
this wife does experience an epiphany—it is all clear to her now. She is thinking to
herself, trying to revive herself at the pump, while the neighbors bring Owen into the
house:

I failed him always, she thought, from the very start. I never
loved him like he loved me; not even then, long ago, the time
I took the flowers off my hat. It wasn’t for Brigid, like he
thought. I was only making myself out to be what he imagined
I was. I didn’t know enough about loving to change myself
for him. I didn’t even know enough about it to keep him loving
me. He had to give it all to Brigid in the end.

She makes her way back to Brigid’s cottage where they had laid her husband on
the settle bed. Someone says to her, “Something will have to be done about her now all
right.” The woman agrees; she tells Brigid “Get your hat and Coat...You’re coming home
with me.” Unlike Ella, in “A Happy Death,” the woman in “Brigid” does come to the
realization that love had been wasted, and that she was to blame. She no longer blamed her husband, but took on the responsibility for love herself by taking Brigid to live with her. She would make it up to him in death at least, if she could not in life.

Again, this is a wife who is disappointed in the institution of marriage, because she failed to understand that in order to make a marriage successful, there must be genuine, mutual love. She was expected to marry by the rules of society, but marriage for convenience and convention does not lead to happiness. Owen and his wife did not find happiness in their marriage while he was alive. During his life, Owen had found it in his sister Brigid. His wife is only able to find happiness when she acts according to her conscience and unselfishly takes Brigid to live with her. She finds out the true meaning of love through Brigid, just as her husband did.

In the novella, *The Becker Wives*, we see the effect of traditional gender role expectations on a brilliant, lively female artist, Flora. She is a Becker wife, but she is sharply contrasted with the other Becker wives in the story, who represent the traditional, passive, cow-eyed—albeit mediocre—wife and mother figure of middle-class Dublin society. "*The Becker Wives* resonates with questions that have filled the diaries, letters and published works of talented women for at least two hundred years." These questions include: Will a woman’s creativity eventually be destroyed by the demands of her traditional gender role? Is motherhood the ultimate end of her creativity?

Flora is introduced to the Becker family through Theodore, the youngest and the most liberal-minded of a wealthy, stodgy, middle-class Dublin corn merchant family. Flora is a gothic, mysterious heroine juxtaposed on "the solid, closely observed world of middle-class Dublin." She is a rare, talented creature such as the Beckers had never known. They are materialistic and lack any real taste, imagination or talent. Each of the three oldest Becker children marry slightly below their station, with no dowries and no panache. Marriage, however, is extremely important to the Beckers, especially because on his deathbed "old Bartholomew had gathered his sons around him in the
high-ceilinged bedroom in which he had begot them, and ordering them to prop him upright, had given them one final injunction: to marry, and try to see that their sister married too.\textsuperscript{20}

Old Becker's injunction was based on his own happy and materialistically successful marriage to an unpretentious, down-to-earth, but extremely common woman:

...the dowry she brought with her was Content. By centering her young husband's desires within the four wall of the house on the quayside, Anna had contributed more than she knew to the success of the firm. For, when other young men of that day, associates and rivals, were out till all hours in pursuit of pleasure and the satisfaction of their desires, Bartholomew Becker was to be found in his counting house, working at his ledgers, secure in the knowledge that the object of his desires was tucked away upstairs in their great brass bed.\textsuperscript{21}

When the story opens, Samuel and Theobald, the two youngest, remain unmarried. Theobald, a lawyer and the only Becker who does not work for the family business, has a desire to make a marriage match that is out-of-the-ordinary. His opinion is that:

Surely he and his brothers should set out to do better than their father: To go a step further, as it were, not stay in the same rut. It was one thing for old Bartholomew, at the outset of his career, to give himself the comfort of marrying a girl of his own class, but it was another thing altogether for his sons, whom he had established securely on the road towards success, to turn around and marry wives who were no better than their mother.\textsuperscript{22}

In fact, Theobald considers his family to be dull, conventional and downright boring. He is embarrassed by them. They stare greedily at other people when they go out to dinner, but remain completely unremarkable to others. Indeed, only a short time after Julia and Charlotte, his sisters-in-law, entered the family, they took on the same look as his mother—heavy from child-birth, furred, jeweled and broad-faced, and it was difficult “unless you were at close quarters—to distinguish one from the other of the three Becker wives.”\textsuperscript{23} What appalled Theobald most was that they all emanated “in spite of the money lavished on them, such an aire of ordinariness and mediocrity.”\textsuperscript{24}
One night, Samuel agrees that he can do better. At this point in the story, Samuel introduces his fiance, Honoria. Samuel thinks that she is distinguished from the other Becker wives because she is the sole heiress of a wealthy rival merchant. Of course, this was not at all what Theobald meant. He wanted one of them to bring someone of taste, imagination, breeding and talent to the family. He decides to do this himself with his Flora, who was the size of a mere bird compared with the other Becker wives. When he tells his sister, Henrietta, about Flora, she tries to imagine what this person could be like:

A bird? All the time they’d been talking, Henrietta had been trying unsuccessfully to visualize the appearance of this person, Flora. Now, all at once, with Theobald’s mention of her birdy appetite, Henrietta’s imagination rose with a beat of wings, and before her mind’s eye flew gaudy images of brightly plumed creature of the air. They made her quite dizzy, those images, until they merged at last into one final image of a little creature, volatile as a lark, a summer warbler, a creature so light and airy that it hardly rested on the ground at all.25

Flora takes the family by storm when she is strategically introduced to the family at Samuel’s engagement party. She has talent as an actress, and she amuses everyone with her imitations of things and people. Eventually, however, Theobald begins to become jealous of her:

Everywhere she went Flora attracted attention. Shades of the days when Theobald had sighed over the nonentity of his family! Now, where ever they went—that is to say if Flora was with them—they were followed at every step by glances of admiration or curiosity. And if they happened to take a meal out in a public restaurant, which they did not do so often nowadays, far from worrying Theobald by staring around the room, it was almost absurd the way the Beckers fastened their eyes on Flora and kept them on her. They certainly had a common focus now, as indeed did everyone in the room. The funny part of it was that it began to look as if in this regard Theobald could have had too much of a good thing. To the amusement of his brothers and sister it seemed at times that he rather wished he could hide Flora’s light under a bushel.26

Flora took to imitating members of the family, and in her charades “No one could have been more serious. That was the core of her genius: that she could keep her face straight when everyone else was doubled up with laughter.”27 Eventually, Flora began to
concentrate all of her powers on Honoria, who ended up, despite Samuel’s attempts to break out of the family rut, to be the most Becker-like of all of the Becker wives. Flora began to imitate Honoria more and more, especially in her pregnancy, to the point of obsession. Flora, who was just as thin and light as ever after marriage, took on the movements of a woman heavy with child, and she even started knitting. Incredibly, Flora was beginning to take on the essence of the other Becker wives. Finally, Flora will not answer to her own name, but only to the name of Honoria. She has gone insane and has to be sent away. “What was clever becomes grotesque, what was charming becomes obscene, as gradually the truth emerges. Flora’s little dramas are made not to entertain but to survive. She lives through the people she pretends to be not because she is a clever mimic but because she has no choice.”

Flora takes on the traditional gender role of the other Becker wives, despite her natural inclinations. “We can see Flora as doomed not only by the frustratingly conventional environment into which she was married, but also by the role set for her as a woman in that society.” But again, it is sometimes difficult to assess Lavin’s message. Is Flora destroyed by the gender role expectations surrounding her, which is to be constantly with child and taking a subordinate role to her husband, or is she destroyed by her art? In truth, the other Becker wives are equally oppressed by their mediocrity and materialism. A.A Kelly writes that “The distinction between the external and internal reality is what The Becker Wives is about, with the Beckers representing those whose realities are external and Flora one whose realities are internal. In the story, excessive attachment to the one leads to crass materialism, to the other, madness.” The key to fulfillment is in balance, and not in excessive addiction to self-indulgence of any kind, whether it is wealth or art. Again, Lavin espouses personal responsibility over adherence to social expectations of a wife or of an artist. The path to happiness in this case is finding a balance between external and internal life.
Unlike "A Happy Death" and *The Becker Wives*, "Frail Vessel" features a marriage in which true love does bring a measure of happiness, but it comes only at a severe price. The young Liddy Grimes and the older Alphonsus Carmody experience a real, deep connection of true love that goes beyond social conventions. This relationship is contrasted with the extremely conventional and convenient marriage of Liddy’s older sister, Bedelia. This contrast between the two marriages is heightened because the story is narrated “within the third-person limited view of Bedelia’s commonsense mind.”

Bedelia is practical and completely unromantic, which makes it very difficult for her to recognize Liddy’s romantic relationship with Carmody.

Following her parents’ death, Bedelia finds herself responsible for Liddy, who is only 16 years old, and so Bedelia decides to go ahead quickly after the funeral with her marriage to Daniel, the young shop boy whom Bedelia had depended upon to save the family business when their father died. In the first paragraph, we find that Bedelia’s motives for marriage are based on the convenience of running the business and for Liddy’s sake, so that a home could be provided for her. In fact, the whole town agreed that this was the best arrangement for them all—conventional wisdom approved: “...everyone sympathized with the necessity for an immediate formal settlement. In their case, there was certainly no disrespect intended toward the dead. But Liddy! Bedelia was shocked to find that Liddy had no regard at all: for the living or the dead.”

A man who “was a lot younger than he looked” had come to town only a few months earlier to set up a solicitor’s practice out of a hotel room. His name was Alphonsus Carmody, which is quite a romantic name. He represents romance and the mystery of physical and soulful love. We never see anything from his point of view, or learn much about him. He remains mostly clouded over with Bedelia’s criticisms of his mysterious and seemingly shady origins. Nevertheless, Carmody begins to court young Liddy, even though it never occurred to the no-nonsense Bedelia “that there could be
anything romantic about him.\textsuperscript{33} At first, Bedelia takes Carmody’s attentions to her sister as a joke. But, the day Liddy reveals that Carmody wants to come to speak to her about a marriage proposal, Bedelia realizes that things had gone beyond her control.

Bedelia’s first response was purely practical. How would Carmody support Liddy? After all, he was hardly financially successful. Where would they live? This is typical of Bedelia’s completely unromantic character. She viewed marriage as an extremely practical affair. Also, there was the matter of her own marriage. She became suddenly jealous of her sister. As Carmody was coming up stairs, Bedelia’s mind races over the situation:

Goodness knows, she hadn’t expected much fuss to be made about her own marriage, what with not being out of mourning, and Daniel having always lived in the house anyway; but it did seem a bit unfair to have this excitement blow up around Liddy. Two rare, very rare, and angry tears squeezed out of Bedelia’s pale eyes, and fell down her plain round cheeks...Bedelia felt that a mean trick had been played on her...Already she could imagine the fuss there would be over Liddy—the exclamations and the sighs of pity and admiration. Such a lovely bride!\textsuperscript{34}

It was the comparison with her sister that upset Bedelia the most, because “never at any time did she regard her own marriage as anything but a practical expedient.”\textsuperscript{35} Carmody does convince Daniel, and then Bedelia reluctantly, that he had been waiting all his life for someone just like Liddy to marry. As far as the practicalities were concerned, he had it all worked out, which Bedelia considered typical lawyer bamboozlement. They could live in an old house that the sisters owned until he had built up his practice enough for a better place. He painted a very romantic picture, which was almost repugnant to Bedelia, who thinks to herself that “Nowadays people didn’t go on with nonsense about waiting for the right person to come along. There was nothing like that between herself and Daniel! Daniel certainly didn’t go down on his knees to her!”\textsuperscript{36} Again, this captures the essence of Bedelia’s unromantic, practical nature.
After Carmody’s departure from the room, Liddy’s reaction, however, is subtle as she picks up a tablecloth, behind which “she smiled, a dreamy, secretive little smile.” She declares to Bedelia that she knew what Carmody meant by his romantic declarations, and that she felt so familiar with him already that it was like they had already known each other for years. Liddy even goes so far as to say “I feel more familiar with him than with you!” Bedelia then demands to know if Liddy “had been cheap,” but Liddy is quite innocent, although she does make a small confession to her sister. Liddy had loved to go into Bedelia’s room when she was a child to share the big, brass bed with Bedelia when she would get lonely. She had enjoyed being with Bedelia, but she confesses that she “couldn’t bear it if [their] feet touched!” However, Liddy declares that she wouldn’t mind if Carmody’s feet touched hers in bed after they are married. Bedelia is disgusted, mostly because she had never given any serious consideration to the physical aspects of marriage before. She had just been taught to ignore those issues. This extremely subtle and Victorian reference to sexuality is typical in Lavin’s stories (although it is not present in all). Sexuality is very present, but it is either perceived through the vague sensibilities of virgins before marriage (like the possibility of feet touching), or it is perceived with disgust and shame after marriage, usually referred to in the context of pregnancy.

After Bedelia finally consents to let Liddy and Carmody marry, there is a gap of time in the narrative and it resumes six months later. By this time, Bedelia had been married to Daniel for six months, while Liddy and Carmody had also been married for six months. Liddy comes to Bedelia asking her for a break on the rent money for the small house that she and Carmody lived in, which wouldn’t make much financial difference to Bedelia and Daniel. At first, Bedelia makes excuses, causing Liddy to realize that her attitude was really an indictment of Carmody and his inability to establish any kind of successful business. Bedelia asks why Carmody doesn’t come to do his own begging. Liddy is incensed and makes it very clear that Carmody had not sent her. Liddy
storms off before Bedelia has a chance to tell her that she has changed her mind. By this
time, Bedelia, heavy with a pregnancy, doesn’t run after her. Liddy does not return to the
house. And, “having resented the intrusion of Liddy’s frivolous and sentimental affair
during her marital arrangements, Bedelia feels fully justified in her harsh treatment of
Liddy, the ‘frail vessel’ of the story.”

Two months later, we see Bedelia brooding over her loss of Liddy and over her
growing hatred of Carmody for taking away her sister. She had hoped that Liddy would
have been around to keep her company and to help her in her pregnancy. Bedelia realizes
that “after the tepid experience of her marriage with Daniel...no one can ever be as near
to you as your own flesh and blood.” In fact, Bedelia was longing for the simple,
unphysical ties with her sister. She had become ashamed of the physicalities of marriage
and of her pregnancy. She even grew ashamed when the maids looked at her “swollen
abdomen.” This seems to be a prevalent attitude among the unenlightened mothers in
Lavin’s stories—an extreme need to conceal and be discreet about pregnancy.

Just when Bedelia felt that her sister would never return again, she hears her on
the stairs. Liddy came in to ask Bedelia for yet another favor. Carmody was caught in an
insurance fraud—he used the money from policies to pay for expenses instead of turning
it into the insurance company. Liddy is almost proud of Carmody’s efforts to increase his
income for her:

“Well, you see,” she said falteringly, “when we got married Alphonsus wanted to
do everything he could to increase his income and so he took on an insurance
agency—temporarily, of course, although lots of solicitors do it. He thought he
might work it up a bit and that it would bring in a little regular money until his
practice grew—you needn’t look so contemptuous, Bedelia...the commission
wasn’t very much, but Alphonsus’ idea was to get as many policies as we could
and last month”—here a weak note of pride came into her voice—“last month he
collected eleven premiums totaling forty-seven pounds.”

Liddy asks Bedelia for a loan in order to pay back the insurance company before the
police inspector comes to investigate and possibly arrest Carmody. Liddy guarantees to
pay her back. Further, if Liddy can’t come up with the money before that afternoon, Carmody will have to leave town to look for other work in order to pay off the debt, and to avoid the constabulary. Bedelia is willing to pay the debt off, but only if Carmody is uninformed and is forced leave town in order to teach him a lesson. Bedelia wants Carmody to learn responsibility for his foolish actions. Bedelia imagines that once Carmody leaves town, Liddy will never see him again, and she feels that she has succeeded in getting her sister back. “Her vengeful triumph, however, backfires on Bedelia. Her desire to have Liddy at home during her pregnancy is defeated by the discovery that Liddy, too, is pregnant.”

Bedelia is defeated by her practical, materialistic and ambitious interference in “the lives of others by placing mercantile interests and middle-class conventions above human feelings and family loyalty.” She not only sees true love as impossible, but also as contemptuous. The denouement of this story centers around Liddy’s reaction to the possibility that she will never see Carmody again. She is happy to have his child, and her reply to Bedelia’s suggestion that Carmody is gone for good is “Even still...,” implying that, even though Carmody is gone, her time with him was worth paying the price of his departure. Liddy has known true, intimate love, while Bedelia remains deprived of any true human experiences because of her unromantic, selfish pride. The “Frail Vessel” leads us to conclude that marriage should be entered into based on love and not on the expectations of society. Bedelia sees her marriage as the only way to security and to being accepted by her traditional society, and not as a truly deep and spiritual experience as Liddy does. Bedelia, in her selfish and materialistic world, will never be able to find happiness unless she can learn to love. Liddy must sacrifice Carmody, but she did find happiness in her love for him and she will continue to find it in her love for his child.
NOTES

2 Ibid, 71.
3 Ibid, 61.
5 Ibid, 144.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid, 199.
10 Lavin, 145.
11 Peterson, 41.
12 Lavin, 304.
13 Ibid, 305.
14 Ibid, 309.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid, 310.
17 Ibid, 311.
19 Ibid, 45.
21 Ibid, 4.
22 Ibid, 5.
23 Ibid, 8.
24 Ibid, 9.
26 Ibid, 62.
27 Ibid, 66.
29 Meszaros, 49.
30 Peterson, 96.
32 Ibid, 281.
33 Ibid.
36 Ibid, 287.
37 Ibid, 288.
38 Peterson, 96.
39 Lavin, 289.
40 Ibid, 293.
41 Peterson, 96.
42 Ibid.
CHAPTER 4

HUSBANDS

When seen through the lens of Lavin’s female narrators, men are shown “from many different points of view, the clumsy young lover, the romantic beau, the domineering or weak husband or father, the self-centered career man, the vacillator.” Similarly, she depicts these kinds of male experiences through the eyes of her male narrators, giving her readers a more balanced perspective on the human condition than if she had ignored the male experience. Lavin’s ability to explore the depths of a man’s private life in so many of her stories serves as a testimony to the wide range of her canvas. The male writers to whom she has been compared, such as Frank O’Connor and Sean O’Faolain, fall very short of giving the female so much consideration in their work.

Lavin’s fiction underwent an evolution as she grew older. Her earlier stories are somewhat based on the memories and feelings of her parents, while her later stories reflect her own emotional growth and a greater independence from Victorian mores. There is more room for relationships between men and women outside of the traditional route of marriage. However, in the best of Lavin’s earlier work, she explores the lives of her male main characters with great sensitivity as she brings to light how the strictures of traditional gender roles have been a burden to men, as well as to women, which is a unique position for a twentieth-century woman writer. Feminist writers have often overlooked male sensibilities, having decided that there was only one-dimensional oppressive demands in their voices; just as many male writers have included only
shadowy female stereotypes in their work.

In the broader picture of Lavin’s fiction, there appear many kinds of men, including the domineering and the hypocritical. But it is in the best of her early stories, such as “A Happy Death” and “At Sallygap,” where she portrays men as human beings who long just as much for fulfillment and happiness as women, but find themselves trapped in a marriage whose “love remains as a memory in the mind, an ideal to be blindly and mistakenly striven for”2 and the toll of gender role expectations has been great. In most cases, they are seen in a sympathetic, but not always in a positive, light. If a man is sensitive or artistic, like Robert in “A Happy Death,” they are usually despised by their wives because they fail to live up to society’s expectations of a strong man. First in this chapter, we will examine Manny in “At Sallygap,” a man whose wife first took away his self-respect and then ridicules him for his weakness.

The main character of “At Sallygap” is Manny Ryan, a middle-aged man who pines for exploration and adventure, because he did not take the opportunity to pursue them in his youth. Domesticity versus the free life of an artist are the thematic binary opposites in this story. “Manny’s problems occur when his artistic sensibilities clash with those of a business-minded Annie.”3 Martha Vertreace suggests in a 1992 article that “Lavin’s point [in “At Sallygap”] is that art is elusive; its pursuit, dangerous, since the artist seeks immortality through artistic expression, rather than through the church or through offspring.”4 However, this is the kind of interpretation that sees Lavin as anti-art and quite conservative, just as she has been nearly accused of being anti-feminist because she tries to give men a voice in her fiction. In truth, Lavin ridicules those who allow themselves to be dictated to by the church and by domestic roles if it means acting contrary to private conscience. In her interpretation, Vertreace seems to be taking into account only the first half of the story when Manny gives up his art to be subjected to domesticity. But in the second half of the story, Manny’s true suffering is revealed and he is seen as a victim of his wife’s brutal expectations of him. Again, Lavin has the mind of
a satirist. She often painstakingly and with a straight face portrays exactly what she thinks is absurd—in the voice and tradition of Swift, as well as Austen. The pursuit of art can be fulfilling, not “dangerous” (according to Vertreace) if a person will not allow him or herself to be defeated by a weak will, as Manny is.

In fact, Manny can be compared with Flora in *The Becker Wives*. Manny is Flora’s male counterpart as an artist trapped in a traditional domestic gender role. His story explores the consequences of entrapment by banalities on the temperament of the creative and artistic person. Lavin’s theme surrounding her sensitive, artistic characters like Manny and Flora establishes that the narrow expectations of society can destroy the happiness and personal fulfillment of those who try to operate outside of society’s norms.

In Manny’s case, after he gives up a chance to go play his fiddle in Paris, Annie has the sensitive, artistic Manny running a grocery business, which is as pedestrian as he could get in contrast with playing in a band in “gay Paree,” as Manny calls it. Ironically, over the years Annie comes to resent Manny for his weak will in capitulating to her—first, by giving up his soul to marry her, and then by always being kind to her. He tries to avoid quarreling, but this is what she really wants in order to see him display some manly backbone. She even actually becomes jealous of women whose husbands beat them, because at least they had some excitement in their lives, instead of the weak-willed tepidness of a beaten and sensitive soul.

When the story opens, Manny is riding the bus into the country for the first time in years in order to arrange for fresh eggs to be supplied to his shop from a farmer. He sees a ship bound for Europe and he begins to tell a young man sitting on the seat next to him about the opportunity he had to go to Paris with his band when he was young. The boat is symbolic of his lost freedom. He says of the boat, “I take a great interest [in it] indeed, but I have my reasons, I have my reasons.” He is still pining for the boat that would have taken him away. He has also come to resent Annie for taking away his freedom. Manny expresses his profound regret to the young man: “I was heading for
Paris—gay Paree, as they call it over there—and I often wish to God I hadn’t turned my back on the idea.” Next, Manny pulls out a photograph and shows the young man a picture of him as a youth. Now, Manny is indelibly stamped with the look of a city-dweller, specifically a Dubliner; he has been undeniably altered and domesticated compared with the youthful photo:

Both faces had the same nervous thinness, the same pointed jaw, and the same cleft of weakness in the chin. Only the eyes were different. The eyes in the photograph were light in color, either from back lighting on the part of the photograph or from youthful shallowness and immaturity in the sitter. The eyes of the older Manny were dark. They had a depth that might have come from sadness, but, wherever it came from, it was out of keeping with the cockiness of his striped city suit and his bowler hat.

Here Lavin uses the eyes to mirror Manny’s transformation. In his youth they were light, while now they are darkened with sadness. She even suggests that his misguided artistic temperament is “out of keeping” with his city accoutrements. According to the observations of the young man on the bus, a domesticated Dubliner is incapable of artistic adventure. This is of course a satirical bite taken at the mediocrity often radiating from the dulled senses of city-dwellers. In fact, Lavin makes a comparison between the awakening stirred in Manny by his visit to the countryside and the mundane city throughout the story. She begins by including Manny’s reminiscences of his lost chance to go to Paris.

Manny’s band had wanted to leave their tough audiences of Dublin “jackeens,” who threw dead cats onto the stage. They supposed that Paris would be better—anything foreign always offers mystery and intrigue. Manny, whose only real knowledge of Paris had come from hearsay and postcards, makes Paris sound like a kind of paradise:

‘Paris, lit up all night as bright as the sun, with strings of lights pulling out of each other from one side of the street to the other, and fountains and bandstands every other yard along the way. The people going up and down linked, and singing, at any hour of the day or night and the publicans—they have some other name on them over there, of course—are coming to the door every minute with aprons
round their middle, like women, and sweeping the pavement outside the door and finishing off maybe by swilling a bucket of wine over it to wash it down. 

At this point, Manny interjects advice to the young man: "'Man alive! Sure that's the place for a young fellow like you. Clear out and go...That's what I'd say to you if you were my own son. Cut and run for it.'"

The day the band had finally decided to leave for Paris, Manny looks back from the gangplank of the boat and sees Annie. Years later, he tells the young man on the bus:

'That's right. My bags were on the gangplank and there was Annie below on the quay, with the tears in her eyes. That was the first time I had a thought to her at all. Annie is my wife. At least she is now. She wasn't then. I gave one look at her standing there in the rain—it was raining at the time...I got to pitying her, standing there. I got to thinking of all the things we'd done together...Nothing to be ashamed of, if you understand, but still I didn't like to think of her standing watching me going off, maybe for good, and she thinking over the things I'd said to her one time or another. You know yourself, I suppose, the kind of thing you're apt to say to a girl, off and on?"

Manny had only meant to say a last few words to her, but there was a great confusion and bustling and bumping in the crowd, which disoriented him. The boys in the band were shouting up at him to come back and Annie stood there quietly saying goodbye. He was faced with the classic dilemma: adventure with the boys or stay with the woman? Manny chooses Annie, to which her only reply was extremely mundane: "I knew you'd come to your senses."

A long, brilliant scene then describes the throwing down of the fiddle, which gets smashed on the dock, and the bits float away in the ocean. Of course, the violin represents Manny's lost artistic life and single freedom. "You should have heard the crowd laughing. I always say it's easy enough to rise a laugh when you're not doing it for money!" Annie's reply to this was "It's the hand of God." Annie is convinced that the destruction of the violin was fate bringing Manny to his senses. Manny's reaction was resignation: "I just went over and gave a kick with my foot to the bits of wood, and put..."
them floating out on the water, along with the potato peels and cabbage stalks that were just after being flung out of porthole.” 11 His art was now worth garbage.

Manny never hears from the boys again. He and Annie got married and they opened a shop in King Street. His whole time was taken up with his domestic role until that very day. After the bus ride is over, Manny parts company with the young man and finds himself walking along a country road alone. His business with the farmer was over quickly, and then he went to look for a pub to wet down his thirst. As he walks, a city-dweller, he looks at the country cottage life with some disdain at first and he decides that his rooms over the shop and his modern conveniences aren’t so bad after all, even though he had come to loath them. No, they weren’t so bad after all, but “He didn’t get out enough—that was the trouble.” 12 He decides that he should be able to take some time to himself. This may make up for the supreme sacrifice that he made for Annie.

He comes upon a pub, and goes in for a drink. There is a very loud traveling salesman inside, to whom he takes a dislike. To avoid riding all the way back to Dublin with this uncouth man, Manny skips the bus and starts walking home. On this walk he comes to several realizations. First, he begins to enjoy a rare feeling of recklessness, which gives him a sense of freedom. “The dark hills and the pale sky and the city pricking out its shape upon the sea with starry lights filled him with strangely mingled feelings of sadness and joy. And when the sky flowered into a thousand stars of forget-me-not blue he was strangled by the need to know what had come over him, but having no other way to stem the tide of desolating joy within him, he ran down the road the way he used to run on the roads as a lad.” 13

It is in this passage that Lavin develops her contrast between the city and the country further. Annie is associated with the dismal shop and with the city. As a dedicated city-dweller, Annie would have never understood Manny’s need and desire to get out into the country as a refuge from the city: “And tomorrow, if he were to try and
persuade Annie to take a walk out in the country, she’d look at him as if he was daft. The
Dublin people couldn’t tell the difference between a bush and a tree."^{14}

He now recalls the city and its narrow squalor. The description is almost parallel
to his description of Paris. This time, though, the city seems a dirty, claustrophobic place:

It seemed as if the cool green light of day scarcely ever reached those people, and
the breeze that blew into their streets came out from their own drafty houses
thickened with the warm odor of potatoes. The loathing he’d felt for the city,
years before, when he first came to Dublin, stole over him again as it had come
over him one night long ago in the little theater in Mary Street. Dublin jacksens!
he thought.^{15}

He longed to get away from Dublin again, but this time there was a difference. He
wanted to stay in Ireland—but in the countryside:

Wasn’t it well, after all, he hadn’t gone to Paris? Things turned out for the best in
the end. If he had gone away he might never have come up here to Sallygap. And
he would never have found out that peace was not a matter of one city or another,
but matter of hedges and fields and waddling ducks and a handful of stars. Cities
were all alike. Paris was no better or no worse than Dublin when you looked into
the matter clearly. Paris was a wicked place, by all accounts, even if they did have
a rare time there at night with the lights and the bandstands...He was damn glad
he had stayed at home. What was the need in anybody going across seas when all
a man has to do, if he got sick of himself, was take a bus and come to a place like
this?^{16}

Manny vows to return to the country to find his consolation—a very Romantic and artistic
sensibility—to escape the sordidness of his life. Lavin goes on to suggest that even the
simplest of people can have the soul of an artist, and may still have within them a
connection with nature that the human race seems to have lost. “These are gentle souls
who take nothing from their coarse rearing, and less from their chance schooling, but
who yet retain a natural sensitivity, and sometimes it flowers, as Manny’s did, in the
hills.” Sadly, Manny never makes it back to visit the country. He is chained to the fear of
Annie’s belittling, for “fear of Annie’s tongue hung over him all the way along the
suburbs.”^{17}
At this point in the story, the narrative switches briefly to Annie’s point of view. So far, Annie appears to be a symbol of constricting, but benign, domesticity. But here Lavin reveals Annie’s brand of domesticity to be a kind of poison. Annie sits waiting for Manny to come back from the countryside for hours. She had been titillated by his absence, as if something might actually happen between them. While Manny had regarded marriage as an act of unselfishness to make Annie happy, Annie had really wanted to get married in order to break the monotony of her life, but she found it an even greater monotony because Manny was so consistently kind to her, even when she tried to stir up trouble. What she “sought in the throbbing pulse and rippling flux of anger was the excitement she had unconsciously hoped to find in her marriage bed. But her angers, too, were sterile, breeding no response in Manny.” She was so desperate for excitement of some kind that she even became envious of wives who received beatings from their husbands. At least, then Manny would be demonstrating the kind of behavior society expected of a traditionally strong man. Like Ella in “A Happy Death,” Annie completely misunderstands Manny’s sensitivity.

As the evening wore on, Annie thought that Manny must be defying her at last, and “A wild elation welled up inside her, waiting for a torrential release in shouting or screaming.” But then, she begins to think that danger might have befallen him. She sympathizes with him briefly: “He wasn’t a bad sort, the poor fellow, always wanting to take her to the Gaiety when the opera was on. He wasn’t to blame for being so weak.” Because Manny’s artistic sensibilities do not fit into her expectations of a “real” man, she sees him as weak. Finally, when she hears Manny on the step, she realizes that he was just the same and that it would always be just the same. She didn’t even want to know what had kept him, because “she knew it was some pale and weedy shoot from the anemia of his character, and not a sudden bursting into leaf of unsuspected manliness.” She is indeed unimpressed with Manny’s lame excuse of missing the bus and walking home.
Here, the narrative returns to Manny’s point of view, and the story’s climactic event is relatively quiet, but charged with symbolic emotion all the same. Manny decides that he wants a clean tea cup, and not the one that he had used that morning, although Annie doesn’t want him to waste the sugar in the bottom of it. Annie can’t believe that he won’t drink out of his own cup and she says to him, “It’s queer thing when a man disgusts to himself.” She stood looking down at him with her green eyes, which used to remind him of pleasant memories, but now all he can think of is the green sea water under the landing stage the day he had tried to leave for Paris. “And as the sticky sea had that day been flecked with splinters of a broken fiddle, Annie’s eyes above him now were flecked with malevolence.”

Manny realizes here for the first time the depth of Annie’s malevolence, and he is overtaken by an “adult fear” instead of the childish one he had before. He becomes morbid, thinking of stories of murders. He tries thinking of the hills, but they were fading from his mind already. “He would never seek a sanctuary among them again. For there was no sanctuary from hatred such as he saw in Annie’s eyes, unless it came from behind some night, when a raised hatchet crashed down on his skull, or from a queer taste in the mouth following by a twisting in the guts. His little fiddle had crashed on the pier the day he gave up all his dreams for her, and it had floated in splintered sticks on the dirty water.”

Manny tries to be aware again of the words that Annie just spoke to him, but he can’t remember them, except that they were true. Annie’s contempt for Manny is based on his weakness, on the way that he “disgusts to himself.” It is true that while Manny made a noble sacrifice for Annie, he was not true to his soul; he was not true to his conscience, as Lavin would have every fulfilled human being. The culpability between Manny and Annie is mutual. She should have not been so selfish as to demand, not only his art, but also that he fulfill the expectations of a traditional gender role for which his artistic soul was not suited. “Annie finds Manny lacks ‘manliness.’ Manny only ‘disgusts
to himself because he does not project the masculine image she would like him to have, and, with Mary Lavin’s usual ironic twist, the joke is on Annie. It is she who is the more disgusting of the two.”

Likewise, Manny should have resisted his weakness and stood up to defend his true self. In the end, “At Sallygap’s” “over-riding theme is the hell created by a close relationship between individuals who, from a mixture of temperamental and sociological causes, are mutually incompatible.” But there is more than just the incompatibility of the domestic and the artistic sensibilities evident in this story. Annie’s particular vision of domesticity is one of violence. It is obvious that Lavin wishes to point out the severity of Manny’s mistake—he may even lose his physical life because of it. There will be no happiness for Manny and Annie. They will continue to live lives of quiet desperation, until one day, Annie’s violence erupts into murder. Of course, Manny is already among the living dead, a theme that Lavin takes up more deliberately in her story, “The Living.”

In “The Cemetery at the Demesne,” we have a husband who, unlike Manny, appears to be the ideal man to meet the expectations of the traditional gender role. The carter (a truck driver) is a strong man who goes out to work each day to make deliveries and to support his wife, children and sister-in-law on his sole income. He engages in honest, physical labor, and at the end of the day, he enjoys the comforts of the private domain that the women maintain for him. But even in this situation, there is evidence of these carefully divided roles causing conflict. The carter thinks that he has it tough as a man. While out on the road he thinks of the women he left behind: “He envied their freedom... Women have an easy time, he thought, going about the house at their own pace all day, and chatting with the tradesmen and messengers that come to the door. Not that he minded working—he gripped the wheel tighter—it was up to men to work and keep their women in comfort. Woman is the weaker sex. He wondered where he had heard that saying. It was a very true saying.”
On the other hand, of course, his wife feels that the men have all of the privileges. One morning he asked if it were raining. It was not, for which he was glad. But his wife replies with "I don’t see what difference it makes to you whether it’s raining or shining... You’re under cover all day long, but I have to leave the children to school and call for them again in the afternoon. Last Wednesday it poured all day and I got sopping wet. I came home and changed my clothes, but just when they were dried it was time to out again and bring the children home." 25

Even though both husband and wife entertain these thoughts, each seems to accept the roles expected of them. In fact, at the beginning of this story, the carter and his wife seem to share a basically happy relationship, with no severe conflicts in evidence. However, their relationship is based almost entirely on his conversation and interests. In fact, she has very little to contribute to their conversation at all, mostly because she cannot get a word in edgewise.

The carter, it seems, which is vociferously made known in the first scene by his sister-in-law, talks constantly. The topics of his conversations are trivial, however, ranging in scope from the value of leather goods to the latest story someone told him. In fact, his sister-in-law, Cissie, declares to her sister that she will go insane if she must continue to listen to his incessant ramblings that carry on very late into the night. The carter’s wife defends him as harmless; besides, Cissie should be grateful that she has a roof over her head and food in her mouth. The cause of the carter’s excessive chatter is that he must bottle himself up for hours on end in his truck with no one to talk to, and frankly, he is a very friendly man. He even makes up rattling noises in his engine as an excuse to stop and talk to a mechanic, even though he must keep to a strict time-table for his deliveries. Naturally, he saves up his thoughts and stories for his wife at the end of the day—a delight to which he looks forward. As he travels, he even imagines that his women looked forward to his stories. He thinks as he drives that “Cissie and his wife would want to hear the layout of the land. They’d want to know what the countryside was like in the
vicinity of the demesne. Women set great store by little things like that."  
The carter even considers his condition a bit unnatural. "No man should work alone, out of earshot of his fellow men. Man should work with Man. It was a poor thing to have to spend the best part of the day with your mouth shut."  

One day, the carter must make a delivery of gravel to a graveyard inside a gentleman’s demesne on the other side of the county. When he gets to the gatehouse of the gentleman’s property, he blows his horn, but no one readily appears. Eventually, a peasant woman comes to let him in. She does not offer him an apology, instead she announces that she is caring for her sick child, and hardly takes any notice of her surroundings. The carter, who is interested in everyone, inquires about the nature of the child’s illness.

'I don't know,' said the woman. 'Nobody knows. It just lies there looking up at me, and doesn't ask to move. I'm afraid it's done for!' She spoke with that calm and curious acceptance of misfortune that is found only among peasants, and that passes among those who do not understand them, for callousness and indifference.

The peasant woman asks the carter inside the cottage to see the baby, and sure enough there lay a listless, sickly looking infant “no bigger than a cabbage.” The district nurse was not able to do anything for him and she had told the peasant woman that she’d “better start getting him ready for the road.” Inside the cottage, the peasant woman goes on about what a little angel he is compared with other children. The carter agrees that it is often the best that are taken. At this point, the carter leaves to make his delivery, but when he returns, he adds that it might even be better if the child did not grow up to see the evil of the world: “And you know something, there were many times that I thought to myself that it might be no harm not to be born at all! Life is harder on a man than it is on a woman. I'm always telling that to my wife. Women know nothing at all about the evils of the world. They know nothing about its wickedness."
When the carter had been dumping the gravel, the peasant woman had received a letter from her mother suggesting that she might go to the priest to have a gospel read over her baby. The carter warns her against this, because he had heard tell that is was bad luck to do such a thing. In fact, he had heard a case where a gospel was read over a child who recovered, but it brought bad luck to the family for the rest of its life. The child himself was killed in a bar brawl when he was only twenty-one. The peasant woman apologetically admits that her mother was an old woman who put “a lot of faith in prayers and relics.” The carter replies:

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

On the way back to his house, the carter plans out how he will tell his wife and Cissie about the days events, and about the sickly child. “And suddenly he began to set more value on life than he had ever set on it before. Life is a great thing, he said to himself. There’s no avoiding death, but there’s no use in taking needless risks...you cannot prolong life beyond it normal course.”

At his door, the carter feels more tired than usual, and doesn’t feel like talking, a very rare event. His wife is alarmed, but Cissie is delighted because she will have her sister’s company for a game of checkers that evening. Before the carter goes up to bed, he asks his wife the name of the woman who had told her the story of the boy who had the gospel read over him. His wife denies knowing what he’s talking about. He becomes extremely agitated with her, calling her “a stupid woman.” From that night on, the carter was changed. He no longer came home to talk, except for necessities. One morning, the carter’s wife asks him where he was going that day. He replies fiercely:
‘How do I know until I go down to the yard and get my directions? Don’t ask foolish questions! Women are always asking foolish questions. I never knew a woman yet that was happy with her mouth shut! It’s talk, talk, talk, all the time. Why don’t you shut up once in a while?’

Naturally, the carter’s wife is extremely disturbed by this turn about in her husband’s nature, and she begins to cry. She and Cissie look out the window to see the carter kicking at the clay on the path. Even Cissie is worried about him, and admits that there must be “something on his mind,” to which the carter’s wife replies, “Or maybe it was something he ate.”

Peterson suggests that it is the carter’s encounter with death, “with a strange, lonely woman and her dying child,” that causes him to be isolated from “the simple pleasures of his home.” But Peterson devotes only a few lines to this story, and so further analysis is necessary in order to discover a theme that pervades the story more thoroughly. Lavin has set up a domestic situation that functions as long as it is based on the carter’s trivialities and that each member of the household unquestioningly accepts his or her traditional place in it. When the carter does have a profound experience, he discovers that life is precious and not a trivial matter. In fact, he comes to realize that the words that he has been bandying about so freely all of these years can have a real effect on someone. He advises the peasant woman, but how can he be sure that he gave the right advice, especially when he is unsure of its source? This advice may have been a matter of life or death for the peasant woman’s child, but his wife cannot even confirm his source. He must now use his words with economy and with responsibility.

The house can no longer function as it did because he also realizes that the communication he has had with his wife all of those years was not real, or meaningful, which is why he castigates her for “talk, talk, talk.” Of course, this is ironic because it had always been him given to excessive rambling. Nevertheless, the end of this story has a sense of tragedy about it. He already regards his wife as “weaker” and as stupid. In fact, she displays a total lack of understanding when she suggests that maybe his change of
behavior was cause by "something he ate." Will she ever come to a deeper understanding of life, death, herself and him? Based on her trivial dismissal of his behavior as some kind of gas, it is not likely to happen very soon, especially since she is relegated by her traditional role to stay in the private domain. As the carter asks, "What do women know about the world?" She may never have the opportunity to grow beyond her domestic role, because she is not in the position to "see Life, all right," like her husband. He may continue to grow through his interactions with the public realm right out of compatibility with the relationship, while she must stay in her private domain and never have any further opportunities for growth.

In the case of the carter and his wife, the surface happiness that they originally possessed is dispelled by the carter's realization that the nature of their relationship was trivial. What little happiness they did possess will now turn to bitterness. Both the carter and his wife were suspicious and jealous of one another's domestic gender roles to begin with, but with this complete breakdown of communication, these negative feelings will blossom, destroying any chances for deep, fulfilling happiness. The tragedy of this story is that a marriage with potential will be destroyed because the wife must remain within a small sphere of experience dictated by her gender role, while the husband is free to find experiences outside of the home that she will not be able to relate to. The strictures of traditional gender roles destroy the happiness of the carter and his wife.

In "The New Gardener," we see a husband who has learned to be both the provider and the nurturer for his family—he proves to be successful in both domains. In fact, there is almost a gender role reversal that occurs in this story, which begins when Clem is hired to be the head gardener of an estate. He comes ahead to settle the cottage for his family, making it comfortable with furnishings and food, just like a woman normally might, "for if Clem was a good father, he was still a better mother." His children arrived safely, but his wife is not among them, the reason for which he offered no explanation.
In addition to nurturing his family, Clem also “had a green hand if ever man had...To see Clem handle a young plant, you’d think it was some small animal that he held in his hands. Even the seeds got their full share of his love and care, every single one, no matter how many to a packet. Once he nearly made Jimmy scratch up a whole cement floor in the potting shed where he’d let one seed fall.”

But the real apple of Clem’s eye was his littlest girl, Pearl. He fawned over her and protected her like a truly precious gem. She was a good and gorgeous little child, with white curly hair all over her head. Clem insisted that Pearl keep her coat on all of the time, as if he were afraid she were going to catch cold, but one afternoon she protested vigorously, insisting that “Pearly hot!” Clem agrees to let her take off her coat. There on her arm was a long sickle-shaped scar, which is what Clem had wanted to keep hidden. For this, too, he offered no explanation. The narrator speculates on the origin of the scar: “Could Clem? But no, no! She was his seedling, his fledgling, his little plant that, if he could, he would cup between his hands, and breathe upon, press close and hold against him forever.”

Clem changes the subject by suggesting that they all go fishing, and he asks Jimmy, the farm hand, to catch some frogs for pike bait. Down at the river, there is a scene of pastoral bliss:

The children were all calling to each other and laughing, and Clem was shouting excitedly, but it was Pearl’s small voice that caught the ear, babbling as joyously to Clem as the pebbles to the stream. There was joy and excitement in the air, and joy welled up in Jimmy’s heart, too, as he scrambled over the wall and tumbled happily down the bank, filling the air with the bittersweet smell of elder leaves as he caught at a branch to save himself from falling.

But the bliss is interrupted by “A screech. It split the air. It turned every other sound into silence. It was the frog. There was nothing human in that screech, but every human ear in that green place knew what the screech held—it held pain—and pain as humans know it.” Jimmy had carelessly punctured the frog with the fishing hook, and
Clem was enraged, snatching the frog and rescuing it from the hook. Clem then turned to Jimmy:

‘You didn’t know any better,’ he said sadly. ‘You’re only a child yourself. But let this be a lesson to you. Never in your life hurt or harm a defenseless thing! Or if you do, then don’t let me see you do it! Because I could not stand it! I could not stand it. I never did a cruel thing in my life. I couldn’t do one if I tried and —by God’s blood—I could not see one done either. I only saw a cruel deed done in my presence once...and once was enough! I couldn’t stand it! I couldn’t stand it!’

Next, Clem calmly shows Jimmy how to slip the hook through the skin of the frog gently, like threading a needle, so that it did not feel a thing. Jimmy asks Clem, “‘But won’t the pike eat him?...Isn’t that worse than getting the hook stuck into him?” Clem declares that nonsense; death and pain are two different things. “Learn to distinguish, boy!” Clem refrains, a phrase he had used over and again to Jimmy.

Their fishing is then interrupted by the appearance of policemen on the bank, who come to take Clem away. Clem’s main concern is that his children will be well-cared for. He is assured that they will be, and then he is peaceably led away. This O. Henry-type ending suggests, of course, that Clem had killed his wife for inflicting that scar on Pearl’s arm. This is the price he paid for protecting his children.

Peterson places this story in Lavin’s “Middle Period” in which she used conventional plots, like those favored by men like Lord Dunsany, in order to keep producing fiction even though she was in a dry period after her first husband’s death. It is true that the stories Lavin wrote during this period lack the originality and craftsmanship of her early and later work. Still, “The New Gardener,” despite its predictable plot has several interesting merits to contribute to this discussion of husbands and how they fulfill their gender roles.

First, Clem is highly nurturing and “feminine” by nature. He is almost ahead of his time, in fact. Apart from the fact that he committed murder in a crime of passion, he could make a very good role model for a well-rounded parent in the twenty-first century.
He not only is the provider; he does it by following the dictates of his true soul, nurturing plants as well as people. It is difficult to imagine Clem as a truck driver or a shopkeeper. He is what he is meant to be—a gardener, a sensitive soul, a fastidious parent. But who can say why his wife was cruel to Pearl? Was it because she was disappointed that Clem did not exude the masculine image that she expected, like Annie and Ella? By hurting Pearl, did she know she was punishing Clem for following his heart rather than the expectations of society? Was she jealous of Pearl?

In the end, Clem had to pay a very dear price for being true to himself—he not only lost his children, but he was also sent to prison, away from his beloved natural world. Lavin’s traditional world was not yet ready to “learn to distinguish,” and to accept a man as enlightened as Clem was. His sensitive soul was forced into defending himself and his children against the cruelty of a conventional world, represented by his murdered wife. He had to strike back at an unfair society whose rules ultimately succeeded by locking Clem away. He was not able to triumph, nor find happiness in his role as a nurturing man.
NOTES

2 Ibid, 71.
4 Ibid.
6 Ibid, 19.
7 Ibid, 18.
8 Ibid, 19.
9 Ibid.
11 Ibid, 22.
12 Ibid, 25.
13 Ibid, 27.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid, 28.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid, 29.
18 Ibid, 30.
19 Ibid, 31-34.
20 Ibid, 36.
21 Ibid, 37.
22 Kelly, 75.
23 Ibid, 75.
24 Lavin, 31.
25 Ibid, 60.
26 Ibid, 43
27 Ibid, 41.
28 Ibid, 44.
29 Ibid, 52.
30 Ibid, 36.
31 Ibid, 57.
32 Ibid, 61.
33 Ibid, 62.
35 Lavin, 421.
36 Ibid, 422.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid, 423.
40 Ibid, 424.
CHAPTER 5

DAUGHTERS

In her 1993 dissertation on Irish women writers, Antoinette Mastin defines the role of the Irish Catholic good girl, citing the 1937 Irish constitution Article 41 (which gave Irish women an official role as matriarchs) as the way post-colonial Ireland’s “anxieties about power would dovetail with the need to promote Victorian family values.”¹ The Irish single-sex school system, as well as the Catholic Church, held out to their daughters “the competing and contradictory ideals of virginity and marriage, and a history of self-sacrifice for the cause of Irish nationalism...From the pulpit to the schoolroom, Irish women were taught to internalize a rigid ideology of”² opposition to birth control, compulsory motherhood, marriage and economic dependence as the ideal, and guilt-ridden sex even in marriage. These factors all converge to create very complex gender role expectations.

Of all the characters in Lavin’s family portrait, daughters are the most vulnerable. They are the innocent slate upon which society etches its rules for sex, marriage and religion. As a result, the daughters of Ireland are most often victims of the realities of the world outside of their school rooms and catechisms. They are ripe for the pickings of men, misunderstood sexual drives and the cruelty of the class system. It is in discovering that there is more in the world than has been revealed to them by their mothers and priests that they often make a sudden leap forward into adulthood and its naked realities. Unfortunately, they may become disillusioned, bitter or otherwise harmed in the process.

57
Their search for happiness and fulfillment has just begun once their naïveté has been stripped away. For many, they are simply left to live lives in “quiet desperation,” while others may eventually find an enlightened and happy place in which to live honest to their souls, even if it has become disillusioned with the church, society and expectations for her gender.

“Sunday Brings Sunday” is Lavin’s most poignant and complex story about an Irish daughter’s discovery of sex. In this story, Mona is the quintessential Catholic good girl and a complete innocent. “She and her mother are both pious and biddable but neither has learned to think for herself. Holy Mother Church wraps them in an innocence based on ignorance.” Lavin’s attitudes concerning the most unenlightened aspects of her prudish, Victorian society are made very clear in “Sunday Brings Sunday.” There cannot be much doubt that this story “openly indicts” the traditional institutions for their sexual double standards, and it “condemns the adults—parents, employers and priest—for failing to enlighten [a] sixteen-year-old girl about sex.”

Lavin’s artistic achievement in this story stems from her oblique, almost impressionistic style, “which refuses to be explicit about Mona’s sexual experience, but powerfully shows the confusion and pain that result from ignorance.” For as Peterson has observed, the subject matter of this story is:

the familiar stuff of melodramas. Mary Lavin’s treatment of the subject, however, raises her story to a more complex and objective level than the typical melodrama by narrating ‘Sunday Brings Sunday’ through different levels of perception, and by relying upon a strong symbol as the focal point for the reversal in Mona’s fortunes, she reveals the underlying causes of Mona’s fall. This method of using several angles of vision which eventually merge in the consciousness of the central character resembles points of view developed by Henry James and Virginia Woolf.

“Sunday Brings Sunday” may very well be worthy of comparison with James and Woolf, for along with “A Happy Death” and “At Sallygap,” this story is one of Lavin’s most
finely crafted. Through the innocent perceptions and consciousness of Mona, Lavin succeeds in accurately recreating the mind and emotions of a sixteen year-old caught between her innocent and genuine love for the church and the natural inclinations of her body and desire for romance. This is a very real dilemma, even in our society, and it is accomplished through deft artistry and a complete understanding of the factors controlling Mona's young life, which she does not even begin to understand herself.

"Sunday Brings Sunday" begins with Mona sitting in front of the church pulpit on a rainy Sunday morning listening to a dreary sermon about prayer. In fact, the first four pages of the story is filled with the droning curate, discussing the purposes and importance of prayer, reminding his congregation that they will be eternally sorry if they do not pray. There are echoes here of Jane Austen's long-winded Mr. Collins, but, unlike Mrs. Collins, this curate has a very profound effect upon Mona, who has always taken his word very seriously. Lavin makes it very clear at the outset that the influence of the church on an impressionable girl is formidable, but in this case impractical for coping with reality. The curate's sermon revolves around castigating ungrateful parishioners for their lack of discipline in prayer, rather than giving any relevant and meaningful advice.

When the people leave the mass and go their separate ways, they are described as people who "moved like actors in a play, actors who have rehearsed their lines and gestures so often that they could go through them in their sleep, but who have long ago lost all understanding of the play's significance." This narrative observation makes it clear that the curate was essentially ineffectual in reaching the majority of his parishioners, who are those who have already been through their rite of passage and have been disillusioned. They are jaded and have lost their "understanding of the play's significance." Mona, however, has not yet reached this adult stage. She is still a fresh actor on the verge of life.

At this point, the most powerful symbol in the story is introduced. When Mona
leaves the churchyard she is always profoundly affected by an old woman, Mad Mary, who huddles in a corner creating "an antique sense of weariness and an antique sense of sorrow." She is "half-crazed" and keeps "crying in a cracked, wailing voice: 'Sunday brings Sunday! Listen to an old woman. Let you listen to an old woman. Sunday brings Sunday, as ever was and as ever is!'" The old woman, who has lost her innocence, is contrasted with the still-virginal Mona. The old woman has a wisdom and a warning in her experience; she behaves as if she is mad, tearing up grass and twigs, and rarely going inside the church door. "Over and over she could be heard saying her private litany. What she meant no one troubled to ask, because everyone put some meaning or other into the words himself and left it at that. 'Sunday brings Sunday!' It sounded like one of those sayings that are true no matter what way you take them." The ambiguity of Mad Mary's cry "Sunday brings Sunday" leaves room for several layers of symbolic resonance, which is increasingly revealed as the story continues.

Mad Mary herself as a symbolic messenger is the representation of all that has the possibility of going wrong in Mona's future. She is "Mad Mary," far from the perfection of "Mother Mary." In fact, she is the opposite of the Madonna ideal, disillusioned and used up by the world--by the real world that Mona has yet the come into contact with.

After church, as Mona heads towards home on her bicycle, the boys tease her. She wished that she was already sixteen so that then the boys "wouldn't take liberties" or laugh at her. When she was sixteen, "They wouldn't so much as turn around then, when she rode out of the chapel yard. They'd keep facing to the wall, and scuffling the ground, and shoving each other, and wrestling. And if one of them got caught stealing a look at her legs when she'd be getting up on the bike, he'd have to say 'How' you?' real respectful, and give her a beck of his cap." These boys are the closest Mona has gotten to the real world, which she naturally also longs to be a part of. Her life has provided her
with the realm of the church and the prospect of boys and romance, but she has not been remotely enlightened on the relationship between these two worlds.

In fact, Mona longed to be treated well by the young men. As soon as a young lady went into service, they stopped treating her like a child and began looking to go walking out with her. Mona daydreamed about which would be the first boy who would want to go out with her. Mona sometimes heard giggles behind gates and wondered what the young men and ladies were doing. Mona thought about every one of the boys and imagined them saying "How' you?" to her. She even invented strangers who would pay attention to her and meet her outside the church, and "The people streaming out of the chapel would all be gaping at her, and the chapel-yard hag would be streealing after them and saying that 'Sunday brings Sunday.'"10

At this point in the story, Mona is aware that she likes to hear the chapel-yard hag shout out "Sunday brings Sunday," because to her it represents the passing of time from week to week, bringing her closer to being a young lady instead of a child. She thought that:

The days of the week were all more or less the same. They weren't easy to mark off from one another. There were the same things to be done on every one of them. But Sunday was different. Some Sundays were sunny. Some were rainy. There was a frost some Sundays and other Sundays the leaves were lashed about in the wind. If she was put to it, Mona could tell you what it was like on every single Sunday, back as far as you'd like to go.11

For Mona, Sundays also marked the seasons passing, even in what the curate said in his sermons. His sermons always addressed the season; for example, he said keeping a May altar in the home saved "a poor exile on his deathbed." That was the sermon Mona liked best and she remembered every word of it. She always had the best May altar; even the priest recognized it after having heard about it from Mona's teacher.

Mona's reputation as a devout girl, in fact, was very wide-spread. Mona's mother tells her neighbor, Mrs.Kineely, that "The girl drinks in every word the priest utters. She's a good girl, even if I am her mother and I say it myself. Do you know what it is,
Mrs. Kineely? I believe in my heart that if the priest told that girl of mine to cut off her right hand she’d do it without thinking another thought.” Mona even stopped regularly in the chapel to say a prayer for “the souls of those poor sinners that the curate said were to be found walking the streets of the cities of the world with no one to say a prayer for them.”¹²

Mona’s fame as a good girl and a hard worker had spread even to the middle-class doctor’s wife, who hires Mona to be her personal maid as soon as she leaves school. Mona is happy to be finished with school and out on her own.

On Mona’s first Sunday away from home Jimmy Carney said “How’ you?” to her and she knew that he would be walking out with her soon. In fact, it was that very afternoon, when she rode her bike out of the doctor’s driveway, that Jimmy stopped her and they walked in the laurel grove with their arms linked. But, Mona didn’t find much to say to Jimmy. She had expected them to be laughing and joking, having a great time the way she saw the other young couples. But as the weeks pass, things do not get better between them, except when they joined a crowd, and then Jimmy started nudging her and she began laughing. And when they were alone, Jimmy was awkward and sweaty, especially when they ventured into Ruane’s hayrick.

When the winter came, the doctor’s wife wouldn’t let her out after dark, because she “couldn’t be responsible,” so Mona only saw Jimmy coming in and out of Mass on Sundays. And, the chapel-hag’s litany continued to be a comfort to her—time was passing and soon it would be time for spring and haymaking. Maybe she’d even be walking out with someone else. This prospect excited her, because:

Jimmy was slow. He was all right, but he was slow. He was the first fellow that ever said how’ you to her and he told her the last time she saw him that he wanted her to stick with him no matter what happened. But he wasn’t well up. He wouldn’t know how to act if anything queer happened. His voice thickened up and his hands sweated.¹³
Still, the spring came and Mona continued to walk out with Jimmy because no one else had asked her, and finally, “the dreadful thing did happen,” and Jimmy started to cry. Mona had to shake him to bring him to his senses. And even still, Mona was completely innocent. She asked Jimmy if there was any harm done. He said that he didn’t think there was any because a lot of fellows did it. And Mona asks:

‘And what about girls? Is it any harm for them?’
‘I don’t know about girls,’ he said. ‘I never went with any till you.’
‘But how could the fellows do it without girls?’ she asked, but his head was smothered up in the hay...He didn’t know anything. She didn’t know herself, but you’d expect a fellow would know. It was his fault. If it was any harm it was his fault. Poor Jimmy, she was kind of sorry for him. Even if it was his fault he didn’t have to be so scared about it. As long as you didn’t mean to do any harm it was all right. Wasn’t it? 14

Despite Mona’s innocence, she still had a sense of the double standard, however vague it was. According to traditional gender roles, it was the male’s part to be knowledgeable about sex: “If it was any harm it was his fault.” But, sadly Jimmy had been just as ill-informed as she, for he had obviously missed out on the sexual knowledge he was expected to have picked up on the street. They are both victims of ignorance, although Mona was left bearing the burden of it.

However, even until the end of the story, she has still not realized the significance of their act. The memory of Jimmy stayed with her “hot and thick” and she began to feel sick as the weeks passed. The cold began to keep her up at night and make her dizzy. She longed for a hot cup of tea even inside of the chapel.

The story reaches its climax one Sunday when a particular line in the curate’s sermon catches Mona’s attention: “...it is by prayer we obtain the grace to avoid sin.” Mona knew that she prayed all of the time and wore her medal. She still couldn’t think that she and Jimmy had done any harm if they didn’t mean any. She thinks:

If he’d only say something from the altar about what was wrong and what was right! If he’d only say something from the altar about kissing and that kind of
thing. But he didn’t. How would he say it, anyway? It would sound queer. Still if he only just gave people a hint. All he said was that company-keeping wasn’t right. But anyone could see that was only talk. Didn’t everyone keep company? Wasn’t her father always talking about the time he and her mother were company-keeping? Weren’t the old people always laughing till their sides split whenever there was a sermon on company-keeping?  

The priest must mean something else, but he never said anything specific. Mona wondered again about the people in the sinful cities. What sin? she wondered. She vowed to pray as much as she could and light the chapel’s candelabra if only there was nothing wrong with her. She began to feel sicker each Sunday. She wanted to run out of the chapel, but she knew that would draw attention to herself, especially from Jimmy.

At this point, Mona’s emotional state takes on the unreality of a dark, angled abstract painting. She hears the hag outside. Mass is over, but she is unclear about what she is hearing. She hears the feet of the people:

The feet were the feet of the year! The year was coming! The year was rushing up the rutty graveded yard. It was rushing in over the splintered wooden floor and grating on the flagstones where the dead priests of the parish were buried. It made a sound like the sound of a million feet, but it had only one blunt leg. She knew that! She knew that. She could see it even though she had her fists dug into her eyes. The year was a hobbled old hag! It was climbing over the pews! It was on top of her! It was skipping the Mondays and skipping the Thursdays and hopping from Sunday to Sunday. The Sundays were a lot of live-eaten pews. It didn’t take long to hop over them. It didn’t take long to hobble along when you were an old hag on a Sunday stick. Sunday stick! Sunday stick? Who said that? Who said that. Who was sick? Sunday stick? Sunday stick. 

Suddenly, Mona grew hot all over, and everything grew darker and darker. She started to feel like she was floating on the darkness itself, “like weeds that flowed on the ditches. But the ditches were cool and green, and she flowed in some dark water that was dirty and yellow and warm like hay.”

Mona realizes, through the image of time passing before her eyes in the body of the old hag jumping from Sunday to Sunday over the pews, that she too will soon begin this journey. She has unwittingly made herself like the hag, and who can tell what the full
significance of her fall from innocence will be? Will she marry the stupid Jimmy? Will she be like Mad Mary, skipping from Sunday to Sunday, until life has used up all of her hope for the future? Will the community condemn her and cast her out?

The church did succeed in making Mona a devoted member, but it gave her no practical information to help her maintain its ideals for a proper young woman—to uphold the “competing and contradictory ideals of virginity and marriage,” thereby living up to the expectations for her gender. The injustice of this situation is like asking a good child to get As in school, but then giving it no instruction. Society and the church punishes the innocent by prudishly perpetuating its hypocritical double standard. If she and Jimmy had been educated about sex, even in the most nominal way, they would have been empowered to take destiny in their own hands. Peterson’s comments on this story summarize well its overall effect:

The highly impressionistic ending of “Sunday Brings Sunday” fuses all perspectives into Mona’s emotional state. Her fall from grace is the fault of the Church, family, and community, but her suffering is personal and tragic. Though the village unknowingly bears the moral responsibility for Mona’s fall, only Mona bears the emotional pain and loss of hope that marks her initiation into the life of the community. 18

Mona’s chance for happiness in young adulthood is cruelly snatched from her by society. She will not be able to evolve naturally into a fulfilling adulthood without a lot of heartache, paying for a mistake that was not her fault. However, Mona is still young, and her soul may find a way to triumph over her misfortunes in a deeply private and spiritual way, just as Hester Prynne was able to in The Scarlet Letter. Still, this is only speculation. The evidence provided by the story is that Mona may well end up like Mad Mary, having had her chances for happiness dashed before her feet by the cold hypocrisy of society.

“The Young Girls” is much lighter in tone than “Sunday Brings Sunday,” but its
theme is similar: a group of innocent, young girls well-indoctrinated in the expectations of the Church and of society are introduced to the evils of the outside world. The arena for this introduction is the twenty-first birthday party of Emily’s older sister, Ena. Unlike Mona, Nell and Ursula and Dolly, Emily’s three teenage friends, are middle-class, but just as susceptible to taking a fall through their ignorance.

When Nell, Ursula and Dolly arrive at Emily’s house, the party of older people has already begun, but the young girls hang about upstairs, somewhat overwhelmed by their first introduction to a world of older men, which is quite unknown to them. The girls look into Enid’s room, which was strewn with the coats and other trappings of the party-goers, and are awed by the magnitude of the older people’s things. Emily offered to keep their coats in that room, but they wouldn’t hear of it because “It had given them a marvelous feeling of exhilaration to look into Ena’s room, but they wanted the security of being among familiar things.”

In Emily’s room the girls brush and comb their hair, talking idly. When Dolly asks Emily if she should wear a poppy in her hair, she says no. Nell agrees, citing that it makes Dolly look too young. They gang up on Dolly, who tries to say that they will be “old enough soon enough,” according to her mother. Nell also points out the fact that men don’t like girls who look too young. Even though the girls are shy in public, in private, like all typical teenagers, they talk up a rebellious bravado that they are reluctant to practice outside the confines of a safe, warm girl’s room.

Outside the window, there are lights in the garden. It looks very romantic and unfamiliar to them. “For a few minutes they stood at the open window looking out at the harlequin lights that swayed indecisively, as the night wind gently lifted them and gently let them fall again. The sad sighing of the wind was more insistent than the violins in the room below. And as they stood there shyness stole over them again, and they felt a great reluctance to go downstairs at all. If only they could stay up here—forever.”

The
outside, adult world in fact frightens them, and they long to remain in their protected innocent cocoon, even though they are well aware that they will be expected to enter that world eventually.

In fact, it is some time before the girls actually venture downstairs. But the clock strikes nine, and Emily expresses her sadness that the evening is almost over. Nell agrees that they should have already gone down. They all look at Dolly, as if it is her fault for the delay. They go out on the landing, but they hang back again. Emily is dismayed that her dress has creases. Nell suddenly cries “’For heaven’s sake!...You’re acting like children,’ and she begins to descend, establishing herself as the most adventurous and opinionated of the group. Emily and Ursula admire Nell’s courage and poise, but Dolly replies that “’I don’t think it matters really...Mother says it’s natural to be shy at our age, and anything that is natural is all right. She says blushing is attractive,’” which establishes Dolly as the most prudish of the group. Her mother’s voice speaks the “truths” of the establishment through her daughter, just as she had spoken the truths of her mother. The rules of society are maintained from generation to generation.

Downstairs, Harry, Emily’s older brother, asks Dolly to dance, but Nell is jealous, because she has had her eye on Harry. The others are still left in the hall. Ursula wants to sit on the steps, but Nell scolds her, telling her that sitting would be fatal. Next, Nell declares “’Really, I can’t stand her’...and the others knew she must mean Dolly. ‘She’s always pushing herself forward.’” They deride Dolly’s dress as being too childish, and Dolly herself for listening too much to her mother. Harry comes back and asks Nell to dance. He warns the girls that Dolly might turn out to be the “belle of the ball,” because he introduced Dolly to a friend of his, Stephen Martin, a medical student. Ironically, Dolly is the first to be paired with a man, even though she is the most shy and repressed of the group.
It was about twelve o’clock when they first missed Dolly. She couldn’t be found in the kitchen or the library. The house had been shut up and no one was out on the terrace any more. Nell gets concerned about her, even though she is critical of her. Emily remembers that Dolly could be with the medical student, who apparently doesn’t have a very good reputation. They speculate that Dolly and Stephen went down to the river, and they are worried about Dolly because she is so innocent for her age:

‘It’s too bad this should happen at your party, Emily. I will say that,’ Nell said dismally. ‘Not that I’m surprised,’ she added, ‘I always felt that something dreadful would happen to her the way she smiles at everyone whether she knows them or not, and tosses her hair back every minute. To say nothing of the way she puts her head on one side like a bird when she looks at you! A girl like that is bound to get into a mess sooner or later.’”

So that it won’t be “damaging to Dolly’s reputation,” the girls decide to look for her discreetly, and they start down towards the river. But they are typically scared of the dark, the frogs and of getting their slippers and their dresses messed up. Nell begins to get annoyed and even accuses Dolly of not being as innocent as she makes out to be. The others get embarrassed and wonder what to do if they find Dolly kissing. Nell tells them to call out to her, maybe tell her “that her mother is on the phone.” Dolly was so soft, Nell insists, that she’d kiss anyone, even the first time that she met him.

“Just then the wind stirred the ivy leaves that twined around the stone balustrade of the lower terrace. The moon went behind a cloud again. And on the river—now so near—a night fowl gave a secretive call...The dangers of life seemed as vague as ever, but they seemed somehow nearer. Ursula caught at Emily’s hand, but Nell was relentless.”

The journey to the river to look for Dolly parallels their journey out of innocence and into the dangerous responsibilities of adulthood.

At the bottom of the river near the boat house, there is still no sign of Dolly, but just in case she was hiding somewhere, Nell makes it very clear that for her part she’ll “never feel the same toward her again.” Ursula screams when a frog brushes her leg, and
they all ran as if their lives depended on it until they were at the top of the terrace, momentarily forgetting about Dolly.

Upstairs, the girls assess the damage made by their trek down to the river. Nell is fully disgusted with Dolly now:

'Don't mention her name to me...that horrid girl. My dress is all wet, I can feel it, and it's all her fault. She's not worth the half of what we've gone through for her. She's—she's—she's vulgar! That's what she is! And as well as that it was mean of her in the first place to go sneaking off without a word to us. She probably thought we'd be jealous, the little fool! I'd love to slap her face...Mind you, it's not him I blame though... It's always the woman's fault...Anyway you can't judge men by our standards. They are not chaste by nature the way we are.'

In this story, Nell accuses the woman of being at fault for sexual misconduct. Whoever is to blame, there is an undercurrent of the double-standard in her words. She seems to have learned the lesson that the woman’s heart is essentially tainted by Eve, and that a woman is expected to be ever-vigilant in her quest to be like the Virgin Mother Mary.

At this point, the girls all decidedly turn against Dolly, and "Sitting along the rim of the cold porcelain bath in their thin silk dresses, they felt exceptionally chaste indeed, and staring down at the tiles on the floor it seemed that even the music that only faintly reached them was nevertheless a travesty of their vague virginal antagonism to everything—oh, but everything—in the world." As young people usually do, they feel as if they can be the judges of "everything—oh, but everything—in the world," even their friend Dolly, who had never given them any reason to think her unchaste before. Their vague virginal world gives them the luxury of self-righteousness.

Suddenly, a light switches on in Emily's room. It is Dolly. She claims that she had been upstairs for a while, because she had a nose bleed. Emily is contrite and feels sorry for Dolly. But Ursula noticed that the blood had come from Dolly's wrist, like it had been scratched up in the bushes, and her dress was all torn and muddy and her slippers were
wet. But before Emily and Ursula could tell anyone, they were all called their separate ways.

As an innocent, well-versed in the expectations of her mother, Dolly is the perfect target for a predatory man. She does not realize the dangers that await her if she goes walking with a man she just met, especially one with a bad reputation. Of all the young girls, Dolly is the most insistent about listening to the warnings of her elders, but she comes to represent the fall from innocence that they will all eventually face, despite their desires to remain upstairs feeling virginal. So far, the young girls have managed to live up to the expectations of the Catholic good girl, but their pride may lead them astray, because if Dolly is a victim of the double-standard, then any of them could be next.

In the case of these young girls, they still have every chance in the world to find happiness, because it is not yet too late for them. However, if Dolly continues to be naive, and if Nell and the others continue to be overly judgemental, they may make marriages for the wrong reasons, thereby limiting their chances for happiness in the future. While “Sunday Brings Sunday” is an alarming and severe warning that happiness may be denied to anyone by society, despite their innoncense, “The Young Girls” serves equally as a warning that happiness may be elusive in less severe circumstances if it is not constantly and carefully guarded by a continual weeding of the soul to rid it of naïveté, pride and self-righteousness.

“Scylla and Charybdis” is another story from Lavin’s “Middle Period,” which Peterson criticizes for its overly deliberate plot. However, it is a clear example of how the Irish social class system erected barriers for those who were ambitious enough to try to better themselves. This story may reflect how Lavin herself felt as the daughter of an estate manager; she would not have been considered on the same level as the other daughters of the house. So not only was she subjected to the expectations of Irish society’s Catholic good girl ideal, but also to the expectations of social class. Zack
Bowen writes that Lavin’s “description of Pidgie sounds much like what I imagine the writer to have been. It is safe to surmise that much of Lavin’s preoccupation with servants and social class strictures originated in her mother’s sense of Tom Lavin’s lowered social status, despite the fact that he was later moderately successful as manager of the Bird estate.”^27

The main character of “Scylla and Charybdis” is Pidgie, the house steward’s only daughter. She is a chubby, but bright and lively fourteen year old, who was generally well-liked by the other servants, even though Pidgie had no time for anyone but “The Young Ladies of the House.” In fact, she was obsessed with them, covertly following them around hiding in hallways and bushes and spying on them. Cotter, her father, was a bit worried about his daughter’s notions about becoming a young lady herself someday, but he was secretly proud of her ambition. Pidgie’s male teacher was also concerned that Cotter would let his daughter “get into the clutches of Those People.” Cotter defends Pidgie to the young man and asks “What better could I do with her?” The teacher does admit that Pidgie is remarkable, but getting ahead socially wasn’t altogether a matter of brains—a fact that Pidgie was obviously unaware of.

Pidgie took her apprenticeship quite seriously in her study of “The Young Ladies of the House.” They finally took notice of her one day on the tennis court and very nicely asked her to retrieve balls for them. In fact, Miss Gloria said “For my own part...I’d rather be running after the balls than trying to hit them,” which “was the kind of remark that encouraged Pidgie’s notions.”^28 After that day, Miss Gloria takes a fancy to Pidgie, who associates everything to do with the family as good and right and full of light, while the servants’ quarters and kitchens were a dark, sordid dungeon. Pidgie imagines that someday she would be as birdlike and free as Miss Gloria, whose movements were like “the flight of the swallows who, upon the sunny side of the house, well knowing what they did, looped in at one open window and out at another and who, far from being
contaminated by the dark tunnel through which they passed, seemed to distill about them the ambiance of the outer airs from which they came."\(^{29}\)

One day, Miss Gloria invites Pidgie to come for a ride in the car while she and her sister get their hair done. Pidgie was to look after their little dog. Pidgie is so excited that everything around her seemed to grow lighter, and she was making her way out of her dungeon into the ever “higher and higher reaches.” Pidgie was determined not to let herself fall back into the “waterlogged quarries of the lower passage.”

As they were pulling out of the driveway, Cotter runs out to give Pidgie half a crown for something to eat if they were delayed. This embarrasses Pidgie, and she purposefully gave it back to her father that night. The next time he gave her money it was in private. He assured her that she might need it sometime if the car broke down or if they were delayed. Cotter tries to warn Pidgie:

“You know very well that they wouldn’t bring you in to eat with them. Those people may make a lot of you in many ways, Pidgie, and I’m glad to see you having a good time, but I wouldn’t want to see you losing your head and thinking they’d make that much of you. You may not have noticed it, but that’s one thing the likes of Those People will never do, and that is eat with their Lessers. Anything but eat with them! Even Mr. Sims, the lawyer, gets his meals on a tray in the library.”\(^{30}\)

But to Pidgie the half-crown stood for defeat. Her notions had grown by this time to include a fantasy about the day when Miss Gloria would tell Cotter that, because Pidgie was so extraordinary, that they would like to make her one of them—like a sister. “What would happen after this revelation was not so clear to Pidgie, but she was able to entertain herself adequately by wondering what room she would be given in the front of the House and how the servants would react to her altered status. She, for her part, was resolved to be very kind to them and not abuse her new position.”\(^{31}\)

Finally, the day Pidgie had been waiting for arrived. She and Miss Gloria were going into town together late one afternoon. Miss Gloria arranged for the Cook to keep

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something for them to eat out on the sideboard. Pidgie was thrilled to be included in Miss Gloria’s consideration of the meal. They returned late and Pidgie went into the dining hall with Miss Gloria. “Never did it look so beautiful, as if there were indeed a solemnity about the occasion, and a mysterious rite of initiation about to take place: a laying on of hands.”

Pidgie’s only confusion was that there was only one place set at the table. Miss Gloria searched for a plate for her, though. Pidgie was very excited by this point. She would get to eat in the dining room like an equal. It would be her greatest dream come true. Pidgie was going into raptures about how the beautifully patterned plate felt in her hand and the cushy carpet under her feet. And the glow of the candles.

Miss Gloria hands her a plate filled with food, but Pidgie is not sure which seat to sit in. Miss Gloria grows a little impatient, but she realizes that Pidgie is hesitating perhaps because she wants some desert. Miss Gloria asks if Pidgie minds if it’s all on one plate, to which Pidgie shakes her head. Pidgie is flabbergasted by the following events:

And then Miss Gloria did the incredible, the unbelievable thing. ‘It will be easier to carry when it’s all on one plate,’ she said. And then, while the significance of her words had hardly penetrated Pidgie’s mind, the young lady ran over to the door and held it open. ‘Be careful won’t you Pidgie,’ she said, ‘that’s a Worcester plate, you know. Perhaps if you shout, Cotter will come to meet you. Oh, and there’s another thing! Don’t bother to bring back the plate until morning. Tell Cotter to put it in a safe place where Kitty will see it.’ The next minute Pidgie and the plate were outside in the dark hall.”

Pidgie did not cry. No. What did she do? The narrator insists that what was really important took place the next day. “But just as she had evaded that Scylla so now she was preparing to defy Charybdis. And when the young ladies appeared on the terrace, although she was there as usual to peer at them between the pointed laurel leaves, Pidgie’s little pink tongue was stuck out at them: as far as it would go.”
Scylla and Charybdis are goddesses who lure people into their traps. As Pidgie successfully avoids them, she still remains full of spunk, and one imagines that Pidgie will one day do something else besides follow her father’s footsteps into service. She will paint herself out of the background her father has provided, and create her own destiny, despite her family heritage. Pidgie has a choice for freedom and to find happiness outside of what society may expect of her. Lavin herself successfully broke through the barriers of class through hard work and education. Based on this story, *The Becker Wives* and others, it is obvious that Lavin considered class distinctions absurd, limiting and out-dated. Happiness is self-determined.
NOTES


2 Ibid, 50.


5 Ibid.


8 Ibid, 69.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid, 70.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid, 73, 77.

13 Ibid, 83.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid, 87.

16 Ibid, 90.

17 Ibid.

18 Peterson, 39.

19 Lavin, 114.


21 Ibid, 117.

22 Ibid, 118.

23 Ibid, 122.

24 Ibid, 124.

25 Ibid, 126, 128.

26 Ibid, 128.


29 Ibid, 36.

30 Ibid, 38.

31 Ibid, 39.

32 Ibid, 40.

33 Ibid, 43.

34 Ibid, 43.
The sons in Lavin’s family portrait are also viewed from various perspectives, just like their fathers, and like their fathers, they are usually struggling to live up to someone’s expectations on their path to happiness, whether it is society’s, their mother’s or their own. In “The Patriot Son,” we see a son who is struggling to be free of his mother’s desire to keep him as a perpetual child. He will not be able to achieve happiness without entering into a state of maturity, which for Lavin’s characters involves a careful examination of personal conscience. Matty Conerty tries to act upon personal conscience, but he is thwarted by the powerful ties between himself and his mother. Again, we see a Lavin character who is up against tremendous odds to find, keep and guard happiness. For some, as we have seen, the odds are just too high.

“The Patriot Son,” which is set sometime before the revolution, is Lavin’s only story that deals with Irish nationalism. But even in this story she remains at her best when she explores the private lives of men, and “The Patriot Son,” despite its political subject matter, is really “about matriarchy and personal liberation...The struggle for national independence...is little more than a vehicle for the character analysis of a young man for whom even death represents a welcome relief from the dismal existence which has been his lot.”

Matty Conerty’s conflict is between following his conscience as a man and
following the dictates of his conservative, loyalist mother. In Matty’s case, he must break free of his mother before he can find out what is it to be a man of any kind—whether he is happy, or free, or repressed on his own remains to be seen. One thing is for certain: Matty Conerty is controlled by his mother’s will. She wants to adhere closely to social conventions and to maintaining the status quo, but Matty longs to act according to his own desires.

Matty and his mother own a shop in a small town, where there is a police barracks across the street. The family of Matty’s childhood playmate, Sean Mongon, also owned a shop, but Matty’s mother considered it a lower-class establishment. The Conertys were the proper high-street shop, while the Mongons catered to farmers and peasants. She considers herself better socially, and she is motivated by money and being conciliatory towards the police. She dismisses any kind of friendship between Matty and Sean.

When he was a child, Matty asked his mother why the country people did not frequent their shop—they went to the Mongon’s instead. “‘Because we live opposite the barracks,’ she said promptly, and pulling out the till from under the counter she ran the silver through her fingers like water. ‘One R.I.C. man coming into the shop with his shilling in his hand is better than twenty traps tied in the yard and the ledgers swelling with debt! God bless the Constabulary!’ she said.”2 In other words, ordinary Irish people would have nothing to do with the Conertys, precisely because Mrs. Conerty preferred materialism over caring for the fate of her country.

Mrs. Conerty is also resentful of Sean’s father because he had been a Fenian. “‘Some people never can let bygones be bygones...It’s the Fenian bitterness. It’s like a disease that’s passed down from father to son...Oh, you know nothing of what people suffered in those days, son!’”3 The Head Constable had informed her that there were men drilling in the hills; she feels that it would be sad if the old trouble started up again. When there is a stir among the locals to form a chapter of the Gaelic League, Mrs. Conerty does not want anything to do with it and she insists that Matty does the same.
One day, Sean Mongon brings a play-bill into the shop advertising Gaelic lessons to be held by the school master in the evenings, which would gather more people for the cause. Sean encourages Matty to join them at their fun, learning Gaelic and dancing afterwards. Matty would have liked to join them, but he knew his mother would disapprove: "He knew her views on the Language Revival," which she considered as moving the people backwards instead of forwards.

Matty tells Sean that he would have to ask his mother before he could go, but he is embarrassed to admit it. "Sean looked at him, at first incredulous, then contemptuous. 'Maybe you ought to ask leave of the R.I.C. as well!' he said. 'It wouldn't do to offend them, they're such good customers!'"4

Matty is visibly upset, so Sean apologizes, but he admits that he wouldn't want the constables sticking their noses in their business and branding the Gaelic meetings as illegal organizations. By the next winter, the Gaelic League was accepted nationally and Master Cullen's classes were held in the open, but Matty still could not go because he worked so late in the shop and was so tired that he just went down to be a passive on-looker every once in a while. But even on the nights when he could go, Matty had his misgivings and wondered if it all was as innocent as it seemed: "...looking out of the window as he was going to bed, the school-house lights, twinkling across the roofs of the other houses, troubled him, as he used to be troubled when he was a child by tales of faery lights that shone on the darksome bog to lure men to folly and destruction."5

The next time that Sean showed up in Matty's shop, he brought in a play-bill advertising a production of The Colleen Bawn, which would be produced with a few doctored lines displaying more guts than the Gaelic League ever had. By this time, the political situation had taken a more serious turn. Matty makes an excuse of helping another customer, but Sean puts the play-bill in the window and sticks around. He insults Matty, accusing him of being too passive. "'Poor ignorant Ireland,' he said suddenly, in a low voice, as if to himself. 'Poor ignorant Ireland that doesn't want to be saved!'"6
Matty is more uncomfortable than ever, because his mother’s ever-present watchful eye is always on him. Before he leaves, Sean asks Matty casually about the doorway that goes between the house and the yard, as if he is reminiscing about their childhood. Matty is fascinated by Sean despite everything, but again his mother warns him about who he talks to because several people in the town were under observation and she wouldn’t be surprised if Sean were one of them. Snatching the play-bill out of the window, she tears it to bits. “I suppose you were right to let on we’d display it,” she said, “but wouldn’t it be an awful thing if you forgot to take it out of the window and the Head Constable passed and saw it?”

After that day, Matty begins to feel torn between his mother and Sean, wishing that his mother wouldn’t interfere with everything he did. He thinks the situation over:

She was an interfering woman if ever there was one. Ever since he was a child she had dictated to him in everything. And it would be the same when he was a fully grown man, he thought bitterly. He’d never get a chance to say or do anything while she had her foot on his neck. And he’d never get away from her, because she’d never let him look at a girl, much less marry one, and bring her into the house. There wasn’t a girl in the whole town that would have the courage to marry him, and come into the same house as her. And then, freakishly, there flashed into his mind the image of the girl on the play-bill, and although he had only barely glimpsed her, it seemed as if she had some enormous strength or power that would vanquish any enemy—even his mother.

The girl on the play-bill is the image of Ireland as a woman. Matty realizes, however vaguely, that his desire to join the men in the nationalistic cause represents his need to break away from his mother to become a man in his own right. The strength of the national brotherhood would help him to break his tie. His submissiveness to his mother is his weakness—joining the men struggling for freedom would be a sign of inner strength and of masculinity.

From that day on, Matty’s attitude toward Sean becomes more sympathetic. One night he goes to the school house to watch the dancing, but they had all gone early. It
was dark. He thought a ridiculous thought—what if the faery lights had got them? He went home and tried to sleep, but he was restless. He looked out his window and felt called out by the dawn. He went out cautiously so that the Constabulary would not be suspicious. But Matty passed unnoticed out of town and headed for a deserted castle where he used to play as a child. He saw a campfire and heard a noise. He looked over the hedge—it was Sean Mongon. Sean is startled and asks him if he knows anything. Matty admits that he doesn’t but wished he did and always had except for his mother getting in the way. Although Sean is glad to hear this, it is too late now, and he sends him on his way.

On his way back to the shop, Matty sees an old, tattered man upend his haycart in front of the barracks across the street. When he went off in search of the means to repair it, the hay blew all over the street. Mrs. Conerty was disgraced in her fussy way, but the old man took Matty’s mind off of that morning’s encounter with Sean. Just then Sean comes into the shop to ask Matty for a few cans of paraffin oil. Since he can’t carry them all, Sean keeps them in the front hall. Matty reluctantly consents but worries that his mother will find them. Sean warns Matty to empty the rest of the large holding container, and to be out of the shop that night, indicating that trouble was afoot. The old man’s upset cart was a prop sent by the nationalists to start a fire in front of the barracks.

Matty decides to help Sean, but that evening, just as Mrs. Conerty discovers the paraffin cans, they hear a shout in the street. The fire had been started and Mrs. Conerty begins to panic. When Matty tells his mother to leave the cans in the hall, she realizes that Matty was in on the incident and she is determined to remove the cans from the hall. “She had broken away from him and reached the door, but at the door she couldn’t help turning around. ‘Oh, how could you do it?’ she cried. ‘Haven’t I been all my life warning you against the like? Do you think a handful of fools are going to get the better of trained men like the R.I.C.? The constabulary will make bits of them, I tell you. And you along with them if they find out about these—but with God’s help they won’t find out. Here, give me a hand with them!”
As they struggle for the cans, Sean beats on the door and the oil is spilt. Matty lets Sean in, who reveals that the plan had failed. The straw was damp. If it hadn't been, Matty and his mother would already have been dead. Sean admits he was expecting too much. The police pound on the door and he hides.

For the first time in his life, Matty makes a decision to act. He puts on Sean's trenchcoat and takes off across the yard to put the police off of the scent. He jumps up onto a shed with a rusted tin roof. Then, he hears gun fire and feels a pain up through his guts. He assumes he is hit. He looks back and sees the body of Sean Mongon. "And all at once, compounded out of the very stars it seemed, a spirit of elation flowed though him, such as he never before experienced. And it seemed as if something that had eluded him all his life was all at once within his grasp. ...They got me, he thought, as he fell forward on his face. But the thought did nothing to dispel his elation which seemed only to grow greater, until in a kind of intoxication of excitement he lay there, feeling the hot blood trickling down inside his torn clothes."\(^{10}\)

In truth, he had only cut himself on the roof; it was Sean who had been shot by the police. Mrs. Conerty comes out with the police, assuming that Matty had run away "frightened out of his wits," and she yells up at him "Come down out of that, you gom!" In Matty's desperate attempt to act independently from his mother, he momentarily feels that independence—his own personal independence through death as a martyr—was at last within his reach, but it is severely snapped back by the reality of his mother's presence. This story includes the typical Lavin ironic twist at the end. Matty's mother has completely failed to understand his flight out of the shop as a lunge at independence from her, and she assumes he is still a momma's boy "frightened out of his wits." In imagining that he had been shot by the police as a martyr for his country and in desiring some kind of remotely noble death, he is making an attempt to be free. His mother reminds him that he must remain in his quiet desperation under her unenlightened conventionality until he is strong enough to break away from her. There is some hope
that he may eventually be free of her; if he is brave enough to act under pressure, perhaps he will be able to venture out on his own. Matty will only find happiness when he acts confidently and succeeds in breaking free of his mother's control and expectations. In this case, far from expecting traditional masculine behavior from him, the primary female in this man's life wishes to keep him in perpetual childhood out of her own insecurity, much less let him even begin to explore what it is like to be his own kind of man. He is not even given the choice to find out for himself whether his path to happiness lies inside or outside of society's framework.

Peterson suggests that in "The Patriot Son" Lavin achieves a "balanced perspective" of the tragedy of Ireland's plight as an oppressed colony, and that she "focuses the narrative on the human tragedy and folly involved in political and military adventures." She does not try to glorify nationalism, since Sean Mongon is killed, but she also points out that Ireland has been hindered rather than helped by people like Mrs. Conerty who is a "sincere but ineffectual citizen who represents Ireland's only one true hope." However, this view is balanced when Matty likens his call to the movement to being lured to destruction by faery lights. There is an element of folly in being lured to violence for any reason, for anyone, at any time.

In "The Great Wave," we see a son who feels so pressured to live up to the expectations of his gender role that he sacrifices the lives of a whole island of people, including his family. Seoineen has been away from his island home on the mainland for several years studying for the priesthood. Just before he is ordained, he returns home to visit just before the year's best harvest of fish is due. He rebels against his mother's prudish and prissy standards for his behavior as a priest, and he goes out with the men to fish the harvest, because his father is ill. He also goes out to prove to the other men that he was still strong, brave and masculine, despite his call to the priesthood. In his case, Seoineen considers the celibacy of priesthood as a kind of emasculation.
The opening passage of the story, however, is set years in the future and it describes the crossing of the Bishop over to the island in a small open boat. He comes every four years to bless the confirmation class. The Bishop is dressed in his finery on his journey, which His Grace approves of. The Bishop has his own reasons as well, “but he was hardly aware of it anywhere except in his heart.” He is quite concerned about not getting wet and ruining his finery, which he values for their beautiful workmanship. Father Kane, the bishop’s secretary, remarks that the islanders wouldn’t really appreciate the finery anyway, but the Bishop disagrees, because he says that he came to appreciate them. Father Kane is reminded that the Bishop originally came from the island when he was still a boy.

Next, the narrative goes into a flashback, and the bishop is now a boy, Jimeen. Little Jimeen has a fascination with the trawlers that passed on their way to Spain or to the Norwegian fjords. He even keeps a careful journal of their movements. His mother disapproves of his hobby, because the sea has made her a widow, which was extremely common in fishing communities. She wouldn’t let him go out in a currach, one of the little native-made boats, for fear he would also be lost. Still, he longs for adventure and feels the sea calling, so he tries to get the island men to take him out, but they had been forewarned by his mother. “‘You’ll never make a man of him hiding him in your petticoats,’ they’d say to his mother, when they’d see her in her shop.” It is easy to see here where Seoineen had become sensitive to the issues of manhood—a protected momma’s boy would never “make a man,” according to the environment in which he had been raised.

Here, Seoineen’s mother, Maurya Keely, is introduced. Through her perspective, we see how Seoineen has become separate from the other men. Everyone considers him sacred, because the parish hadn’t sent a man to the seminary in over a decade. At this point Seoineen is due for a visit, and when he shows up earlier than expected, correctly announcing that the year’s harvest of mackerel would be there on the next tide, the
people heed his word as specially ordained in a superstitious kind of way. He insists on going out for the harvest in his ailing father’s stead. To him, it was as if he showed up early to take his father’s burden, giving him an opportunity to prove his worth as a man, but his mother disapproves. She thinks fishing is beneath his dignity. “It mortally offended her notion of dignity due to him that he’d be seen with his coat off maybe—in his shirt sleeves maybe—red in the face maybe along with that and—God forbid—sweat maybe breaking out of him!” Along with the other islanders, Seoineen’s mother is also a powerful influence on his self-image.

Seoineen reminds his mother that he has not yet been ordained. He is determined to go out, even though the other currachs have already left. Another obstacle is that their currach had been tarred only the day before. Seoineen touches the boat, and it seems dry. Again, it is as if he has a magic touch. “Looking after him they all saw him lay the palm of his hand flat on the upturned bottom of the boat, and then they heard him give a shout of exaltation…and you could tell by the faces that all were remembering the way he prophesied about the catch. Had the tar dried at the touch of his hand maybe?” Again, it is no wonder that Seoineen is self-conscious. His community not only has set up standards for manhood and then won’t let Seoineen fulfill them, they also consider him supernatural.

Seoineen insists on going out and that to ignore the plenty that God provides would be tantamount to sin. He also talks Jimeen’s mother into letting him go—it is his first time. Seoineen is delighted to be out on the sea again, but soon there is a change in the weather and the waves begin to get higher and choppier. But, the teeming fish below them are amazing—the most abundant harvest available in memory. In fact, there are so many that the fish are suffocating one another and appear to be dead until they are thrown onto the deck. Seoineen begins to work the nets. He also starts cursing, which shocks Jimeen at first, “but he reflected that Seoineen wasn’t ordained yet, and that, even if her were, it must be hard things for a man to go against his nature.” It is obvious that
Seoineen has kept some of his outwardly masculine habits, perhaps in conscious rebellion to the humiliation he feels that he is suffering under his community’s double standard that divides men from priests.

The other currachs around them begin to pull in netful after netful. Seoineen’s and Jimeen’s boat begins to dip into the water, and Seoineen shouts at Jimeen to help with the nets. “Now every other word that broke from Seoineen’s throat was a curse, or what you’d call a curse if you heard them from another man, or in another place, but in this place, from this man, hearing them issue wild and free, Jimeen understood that they were a kind of psalm. They rang out over the sea in praise to God for all his plenitude.”

Seoineen is now where he really belongs—on the sea and not in a seminary. For Seoineen to follow his true nature—to be a fisherman—is more pleasing to God than living a sham in a seminary; hence his cursing is a “psalm.”

They begin to pull in net after net, just like the other men. But suddenly “the sky was knifed from end to end with a lightning flash,” and it was dark over the whole sea. Seoineen and Jimeen find themselves alone. The sea was swelling so much that the others were lost to them, until they heard a shout. Another man, Marteen, shouts that they had to let the nets go, or they will be dragged under by the coming storm. Although, the nets are starting to cut Jimeen’s hands, Seoineen is determined not to let go and give up. Again, they hear the voice call at a farther distance this time to cut free or be destroyed.

Seoineen finally cuts Jimeen’s hands loose, but he drops the knife into the water. Still, they did not lose any of their catch:

“What a fool I’d be,” he gasped, “to let go. They think because of the collar I haven’t a man’s strength about me anymore. Then I’ll show them. I’ll not let go this net, not if it pulls me down to hell.” And he gave another wild laugh. ‘And you along with me!’ he cried. Then, as if he had picked up a word from a voice in the wind, he roared it out. ‘Murder? Who said that? What if it is murder? Sure it’s all one to God what a man’s sin is, as long as it’s sin at all. Isn’t sin poison—any sin at all, even the smallest drop of it? Isn’t death to the one that it touched at any time? Ah then! I’ll not let go!...Is that the way? They’ve all let go! Well then, I’ll
show them one man will not be so easy beat! Can you hear me?” he cried, because
it was hard to hear him with the crazy noise of the wind and the waves.19

Jimeen begs him to cut free, but he still refuses, determined to be the only boat to
bring in the catch that night. He even thinks that his catch will be worth even more
money because it will be more scarce. "I’ll show them a man is a man, no matter what
vow he takes, or what way he’s called to deny his manhood! I’ll show them!”20 By then,
the other men had disappeared in the tremendous waves that were forming. Then they
saw a solitary oar. Jimeen looked into the wave and saw a face looking back at him.
“And a moment afterward, but inside the glass wall, imprisoned, like a glass dome, he
saw—oh God!—a face looking out at him, staring out at him through a foot of clear green
water. And saw it was the face of Marteen. For a minute the eyes of the dead man stared
into his eyes.”21 Jimeen is mortally frightened and clings to Seoineen.

At this point, the narrative switches back to the Bishop’s recollection of these
events. Jimeen and Seoineen were saved, finding themselves under the currach atop the
promontory. Jimeen assumes that they were saved because the sacred Seoineen was in
the boat. But Seoineen takes pity on Jimeen, because he had not yet taken in the
significance of the event. The great wave had washed the island clean of everything and
everyone, including their mothers. They were the only survivors. ‘‘It was my greed that
was the cause of all,’ he said, and there was such a terrible sorrow in his face that
Jimeen, only then, began to cry. ‘It has cost me my two living hands,’ Seoineen said, and
there was a terrible anguish in his voice.”22

Not only had everyone been washed away, Seoineen lost his hands. Bitter, he
wonders what he had been saved for. His preoccupation with proving his masculinity
brought upon him a far greater disability than being a priest. He is now so physically
maimed that he is truly emasculated—neither man nor priest can work without hands. He
is taken to the hospital on the mainland and Jimeen is sent to live with an aunt. Jimeen
never sees Seoineen again, even on the three trips he had taken over to the island as
Bishop. "He had made inquiries, but all he could ever get out of people was that Seoineen was a bit odd." As Jimeen, now the grown Bishop, leaves the island, again without seeing Seoineen, his secretary tells him to put on his overcoat. "But there was no use trying to make the Bishop do a thing he was set against. He was a man had deep reasons for the least of his actions."  

Jimeen is called to the priesthood in Seoineen's stead. When Seoineen enters the priesthood against his private convictions, trying to live up to the expectations of his mother and of his community, it causes a conflict in his personality—he becomes obsessed with living up to the demands of his gender role, and thereby bringing tragedy, not only into his life, but also to a whole village. However, Jimeen is successful in the priesthood, because he felt genuinely called to it after his experience on the sea with Seoineen. Jimeen is able to rise above the pettiness of his environment out of true conviction. Again, Lavin insists that no one person should allow another's expectations of him, whether it is his community or church, lead him astray from fulfilling his own destiny. Again, happiness is only found when a person is true to him or herself. Happiness eludes Seoineen because he went into the priesthood against his personal convictions and nature. Jimeen finds happiness because he follows a genuine call into the priesthood.
NOTES

3 Ibid.
4 Ibid, 10.
5 Ibid, 11.
6 Ibid, 13.
7 Ibid, 14.
8 Ibid, 15.
9 Ibid, 27.
10 Ibid, 30.
12 Ibid.
14 Ibid, 318.
15 Ibid, 319.
16 Ibid, 320.
17 Ibid, 323.
18 Ibid, 324.
19 Ibid, 327.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid, 328.
22 Ibid, 331.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid, 337.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, the prevalent theme of Mary Lavin's life and fiction—the need to define, find and guard happiness—is the common thread woven throughout her stories. She captures the sometimes terrible beauty of the human condition in her family portrait, as each member stumbles, cries out or suffers the consequences of society's hypocrisies on his or her path to happiness. The more specific themes of her stories are underpinned by this general question: Does the main character find happiness? Or, does he or she continue to sludge through life weighed down by the baggage of spiritual blindness, a weak will, society's hypocrisy, or an undefinable, gnawing discontent? Unfortunately, unhappiness hangs like a dark, permanent cloud on the landscape of Lavin's fictional world, casting most of her characters in the shadow of what Bowen called a life of quiet desperation. In some cases, Lavin's characters choose despair, such as Annie in "At Sallygap" or Matty in "The Patriot Son." Others are victims of circumstances beyond their control, like Mona in "Sunday Brings Sunday." In other cases, characters, such as Owen's wife in "Brigid" and Pidgie in "Scylla and Charybdis," fight their way through the cloud of despair to the light of happiness on the other side. The members of Lavin's family portrait who do find happiness within the framework of their Victorian society's expectations for gender roles, social class and religion are the ones who have examined their souls carefully and who have followed the convictions of their private consciences despite the opinions and expectations of others. Often, however, they must make a costly
sacrifice for happiness, like Liddy in "Frail Vessel." The characters who don't find happiness are weak-willed (Manny in "At Sallygap"), selfish (Bedelia in "Frail Vessel") or self-deluded (Ella in "A Happy Death"). In the twelve stories we have discussed, thirteen of the main characters remain unhappy, while only about six find that their path ends in happiness, and in most cases a sacrifice must be made for it.

Happiness, we must conclude then, is not easily achieved. We must engage in constant vigilance in our quest for it. As Lavin wrote, "it is only by careful watching, and absolute sincerity that we follow the path that is ordained for us,"¹ and as Harmon wrote, "a rigorous habit of sincerity [is] required."² In Lavin's short story "Happiness," Vera Traske, the story's main character and the character who Bowen identified as most like Lavin later in life, espouses a definition of happiness. To paraphrase: Happiness cannot be confused with pleasure, nor is sorrow its exact opposite. Annoyance, pain, illness, fatigue and sorrow can co-exist with happiness. In fact, they are a necessary ingredient to the grist-mill of happiness. In other words, in order to be truly happy, as person must be tested through the trials of life. The story "Happiness" bears this out.

This story is narrated by one of Vera Traske's daughters looking back at her mother's life. Vera is a widow who lives with her three daughters on a farm in County Meath. Their closest family friend is Father Hugh, who lives in a monastery nearby. Father Hugh felt that it was his duty, and his pleasure, to befriend Vera's family after her husband's death "with the idea of filling the crater of loneliness left at [their] center."³ Vera proclaimed to her daughters that she had always been happy. Indeed, she had good beginning in life "with her redoubtable father, whose love blazed circles around her, making winter into summer and ice into fire,"⁴ and with her young husband. Vera's daughter would listen to her speak and:

By magic then, staring down the years, we'd see blazingly clear a small girl with black hair and buttoned boots, who, though plain and pouting, burned bright, like a star. 'I was happy, you see,' Mother said. And we'd strain hard to try and
tree that grew out over the river,' she said, 'and look down through the gray leaves at the water flowing past below, and I used to think it was not the stream that flowed but me, spread-eagled over it, who flew through the air! Like a bird! That I'd found the secret!...

'Did you swim that well, Mother?'

'Oh not really—just the breast stroke,' she said. 'And then only by the aid of two pig bladders blown up by my father and tied around my middle. But I used to throb—yes, throb, with happiness.'

However, Vera’s true test for adhering to her philosophy of happiness, even in annoyance, illness and fatigue, came after her husband’s death when she wandered the woods and dragged her children around Europe trying to find peace. In fact, at the seaside she would swim out so far that her daughters thought she would deliberately not come back. When she did return, the sound of crying could be heard in her room. The narrator asks: "What was it worth—a happiness bought that dearly?"

But, to Vera, clinging steadfastly to the principle of happiness got her through "the onslaughts that were made upon [her] happiness!" In fact, she ridicules her friends and relatives who told her she was lucky to learn so young that life is full of suffering. Vera did not find it so easy to succumb permanently to sorrow. To her, her relatives’ defeatist attitudes were repugnant:

The minute Robert died, they came down on me—cohorts of relatives, friends, even strangers, all draped in black, opening their arms to let me pass into their company. 'Life is a vale of tears,' they said. 'You are privileged to find it out so young!' Ugh! After I staggered onto my feet and began to take hold of life once more, they fell back defeated. And the first day I gave a laugh—puff, they were blown out like candles. They weren’t living in the real world at all; they belonged to a ghostly world where life was easy: all one had to do was sit and weep. It takes effort to push back the stone from the mouth of the tomb and walk out.' Effort.

Happiness does take effort, as well as constant, careful watching. To Vera, those who did not learn how to laugh again after severe trials were not living a real, truly fulfilling life. They chose the easy way out. As we have seen, many of Lavin’s characters
do not have the strength of Vera. They do not know that love for life, despite its
hardships, is the key to happiness.

However, even Vera admitted that there were times when one had to let go of
happiness for a while. Every soul must go through a time of testing; a time of letting go.
The narrator shares Vera’s idea that “There might be a time when one had to slacken
hold on it—let go—to catch at it again with a surer hand. In the way, we supposed, that the
high-wire walker up among the painted stars of his canvas sky must wait to fling himself
through the air until the bar he catches at has started to sway perversely from him. Oh no,
no! That downward drag at our innards we could not bear, the belly swelling to the shape
of a pear. Let happiness go by the board.”

In fact, it is Vera’s definition of happiness that allows for the dark times of the
soul. We cannot truly appreciate happiness if we do not have anything to contrast with it,
such as illness, annoyance and fatigue. The universe is made up of complementary
opposites—light and dark, good and evil, happiness and sorrow, winter and summer. As
Shelley wrote, “O Wind! If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?” We cannot grow
in the spring unless our souls experience winter. This realization can bolster one into
happiness through a lifetime of trauma and sorrow. This is the message of Vera Traske,
and it is the message of Mary Lavin to people who might see themselves mirrored in her
family portrait.
NOTES

2 Ibid.
5 Ibid, 504.
6 Ibid, 408.
7 Ibid, 411.
8 Ibid, 411.
9 Ibid, 406.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


