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Ordinary Women: Themes in Contemporary Fiction by Irish Women

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CLASSIFYING THEMES IN contemporary fiction by Irish women is rather like answering the question Mary Dorcye raises in her poem “The Ordinary Woman.” A six-page list of varieties of ordinary woman follows Dorcye’s question, debunking the comfortable notion that woman is an essential category. My disclaimer in place, I will not comment on the varieties of themes this essay ignores, but discuss instead some themes in contemporary fiction by Irish women. It’s no surprise that recent work from the North of Ireland reflects the experience of living in a violent political situation, while that from the Republic focuses more on gender and family conflicts and the tensions of contemporary society. Of course these lines are crossed: the conflict in the North, for example, often exacerbates gender and family tensions, while developing a sense of autonomy in the Republic often entails consideration of this northern “family” matter. For the sake of clarity in this essay, however, I shall discuss women’s responses to the violence in the North apart from accounts of female development, love, and family relationships.

The late 1970’s and particularly the 1980’s saw a proliferation of work from women in the North, beginning with Jennifer Johnston’s Shadows On Our Skin (1977). Much of the fiction of this period portrays women as victims of violence. Set in Derry, Shadows is the story of twelve-year-old Joe Logan and his friend Kathleen Doherty, a teacher from Wicklow. Kathleen is engaged to a British soldier stationed in Germany and has come to Derry to try to understand the situation. To Joe’s dismay, his brother Brendan, an I.R.A. member, also becomes friendly with Kathleen. Increasingly jealous of Brendan’s relationship with “his” friend, Joe taunts Brendan with the secret of Kathleen’s engagement to a British soldier, insinuating that Kathleen will betray Brendan to her fiancéé. Horrified at his own betrayal, he visits Kathleen, but it is too late. Brendan’s “friends” have been there already: “Her hair had been cut short like a man’s. Her face was

1. In Moving Into the Space Cleared by Our Mothers (Galway: Salmon, 1991), 47-53.
swollen. One of her eyes was almost closed."

*Shadows* is also the story of Joe’s journey from innocence to experience. But Kathleen, one of the many female victims of the “Troubles,” experiences neither broader vision nor greater freedom. The other woman in the text, Joe’s mother, married to a Civil War “hero,” attacks her husband’s sloganeering about freedom in the South:

Is there a job for every man? And a home for everyone? Have all the children got shoes on their feet? Are there women down there scrubbing floors to keep the home together because stupid useless old men are sitting around gassing about freedom? Singing their songs about heroes? (SOOS, 159)

Johnston presents a society that celebrates a nationalist military ethos—freedom of the country is *the* dominant goal, a freedom defined by unelected, armed bands and opposed by an army. Other human values—friendship, family, love—are subordinated, or destroyed, if they conflict with the designated goal. Working-class mothers are trapped as they struggle to support their children in a climate dominated by “movement” murders, retaliatory night-time raids by the British army, protection money, and the valorizing of the men and violence of the past. Single women can escape by flight: Kathleen, a teacher, has more opportunity to find a job elsewhere than Mrs. Logan, but the alternatives she foresees are also limited. “It’s a sort of routine, really,” she notes of her marriage. “The birth, marriage, death routine” (SOOS, 123).

Mary Beckett (born in Belfast in 1926) also writes of women trapped within a cycle of poverty and violence; this cycle goes back to 1921. Her short-story “A Belfast Woman” (1980) opens with an old woman’s receiving a threatening letter. “Get out or we’ll burn you out.” The time is the 1970’s; the woman, Mary Harrison, a Catholic, lives in a predominantly Protestant street, but the letter replays old scenes. Mary’s first memory is of her “mother screaming” when the family was burnt out in 1921. Forced to move in with grandparents, the family is again threatened and must move in 1935. When Mary and William marry, they live in a Protestant street where William’s aunt has given them a house. It is here that Mary receives the opening letter.

The Belfast Mary Beckett describes is more deceptive than the Derry in Johnston’s *Shadows*. In the “good” times, Mary and William bring up their children in safety, away from the terror that strikes Catholic streets. When Mary hears disturbances at night, William restrains her: “‘They don’t run out on the street here. They stay in’” (ABW, 85). Belfast before the “troubles” isolates and ignores injustice, as Mary isolates and ignores the lump in her womb. Her life and William’s become limited by her tiredness and fear, but they survive in the shrunken world so created. Mary’s daughter leaves Belfast for Canada and writes that she is ashamed of being Irish when she hears the news from the North. “I see talk like that in the papers too,” Mary concludes. “It’s not right to put the blame on poor powerless people” (ABW, 98). “A Belfast Woman” and Beckett’s novel,

Give Them Stones (1987), both show an irruption of hidden cancers in the overt troubles of the 1970’s and 1980’s. The women and men they present are basically decent people who attempt to lead lives isolated from the disease around them. That they preserve a modicum of optimism and much decency in these circumstances is a triumph of humanity, but not a way to curtail or destroy the disease.

Fiona Barr’s short story, “The Wall Reader” (1979), Linda Anderson’s To Stay Alive (1984), and Deirdre Madden’s Hidden Symptoms (1988) depict middle-class women as trapped as their working-class sisters. The women in these and the earlier works, like so many women in Ireland and elsewhere in the 1970’s and 1980’s, are aware of the injustice and the patriarchal nature of the political system, but have not yet moved to feminist demands for equal rights. In a 1989 essay, “Ancient Wars: Sex and Sexuality,” Ethna Viney discusses four stages in the development of cycles of feminism in Ireland which illuminate the literary perspective of the period:

Stage one began when women looked for equal rights with men, and found that control of their own fertility was essential. In stage two women started to invade the ‘male world.’ This meant adopting a male value system which did not always rest comfortably on their shoulders. It also meant doing two jobs. ... Stage three is the cultural struggle now in progress, or more precisely in the process of discussion, which is women consolidating their own value system, accepting some values from the ‘male culture’ and discarding others. Stage four will be designing a new culture, a revolutionary concept for women to undertake because it means redesigning personal lives and relationships.

Recent Johnston texts set in the North move characters beyond awareness into action. Protestant Helen Cuffe in The Railway Station Man (1984), for example, three times a victim of mistimed or misdirected I.R.A. violence, asserts her right to live apart from the violence, to develop herself as an artist, and to nurture her friendship with the working-class Catholic, Damian Sweeney. After a life of mindless conformity to her parents’, then husbands’, expectations, she has come belatedly to recognize and cherish her own values of independence and originality. We might see Helen as moving through Viney’s stages. When her husband, a victim of mistaken identity, is shot by the I.R.A., Helen moves to a cottage in Knappogue, Donegal, begins to paint, and she and a displaced Englishman, Roger Hawthorne, become lovers.

Sensitive and loving, Roger would seem to be the perfect partner, but even he cannot accept Helen’s independence. When she refuses to marry him, he thinks first that she does not love him, then that she wants freedom. “I’ll give you freedom,” Roger promises, assuming that he can (by nature?) give Helen what she wants. Helen’s response shows her awareness and willingness to assert her

rights: “I don’t want you to give me anything. I want my own space. A little bit of time. I don’t want anyone to give me anything. All that kindness, all that giving that you talk about, offer me, it could be like a prison.” Age and a comfortable financial position had already allowed Helen to move from the middle-class world she once inhabited with her husband, where, as Viney suggests, women who participate publicly, socially, economically, often adopt male value systems. But in rejecting Roger, Helen not only rejects the middle-class values associated with patriarchal society, she also consolidates her own. It is true that to this point “the characteristic movement” in Johnston’s novels is, as Christine St. Peter observes, “flight.” However, the heroine in Johnston’s most recent novel, *The Invisible Worm* (1991), published after the St. Peter article, resists flight.

Anne Devlin presents a different perspective in “Naming the Names,” an enigmatic story in her first collection, *The Way-Paver* (1986). Brief but revealing allusions to local circumstances are important clues to the protagonist’s perspective. Finnula works in a second-hand bookstore and lives with her grandmother rather than her parents. We don’t really believe her explanation that her parents’ house is too small. Neither are we told why her Catholic grandmother disapproves of the man who married her daughter, Finnula’s mother. Finnula appears to have a penchant for English lovers: Jack, the “very good journalist” who does his duty unthinkingly, questioning neither motives nor emotions, is the first, and the unnamed son of a judge, the second. Most readers will be unaware of Finnula’s active membership in the I.R.A.—having skipped over the clues—and will be shocked when they realize that she has been set up by her lover, the judge’s son, for an execution squad. Finnula resists police demands for the names of her illegal comrades by naming the names of the streets of West Belfast (Catholic area), and explains that she joined the movement not when her grandmother was burnt out of the house by a gang from the Shankill (Protestant area), observed if not aided by “two turreted police vehicles” and the British army, but only when internment was introduced (*TWP*, 111).

A significant moment near the end of her relationship with Jack helps explain her perspective. Awaking distressed from a nightmare, Finnula begs Jack not to let go her hand “whatever happens.” When she falls asleep again, the “old woman” of the nightmare returns and she recognizes her grandmother:

> She reached out and caught my hands again and the struggle between us began: she pulled and I held on. She pulled and I still held on.

> ‘Come back!’ Jack said. ‘Wherever you are, come back!’

> She pulled with great force.

> ‘Let go of me!’ I cried.

> Jack let go of my hand. (*TWP*, 116)

Despite Finnula's initial resistance to the nationalistic ethos, when the dutiful English lover lets her go, she is seized by the old woman, the traditional emblem of Irish nationalism, the Catholic grandmother.

* * *

The theme of female development or awakening, made familiar by the early novels of Edna O'Brien, has also received excellent and very different accounts in Molly Keane's *Good Behaviour* (1981), Clare Boylan's *Holy Pictures* (1983) and Frances Molloy's *No Mate for the Magpie* (1985). These novels, rich in humor, play with the conventions of the bildungsroman, a predominantly male mode, and we see through the eyes of innocents the absurdity of established social patterns.

Set in the Republic in the late 1970's, *Good Behaviour* takes us back to the "Troubles" of the 1920's. It was then that the narrator, Aroon St. Charles, was a young woman eager to escape her critical mother through marriage, the only way she knew. But her size and personality destined her to remain single. Although revealed as a murderess in the opening chapter, Aroon wins the reader's sympathies as she attempts to ford the treacherous waters of declining Anglo-Irish grandeur. With men and money in short supply, much is made of the code of good behaviour, a code which places desirable women (that is, pretty, submissive, or wealthy) upon pedestals, and reduces all others to dependence.

The central joke is Aroon's apparent ignorance of the lively sexual climate and her creation of romance from exploitation. When her adored father, a notorious womanizer, is crippled by the loss of a foot in World War I, Rose, the maid, becomes his boon companion. Aroon ignores every clue to the relationship, even when she discovers Rose, hands under the bed-clothes massaging the Major's missing foot.10 Her romance also depends on willful ignorance, disguised as good behaviour. Hubert, Aroon's brother, brings his lover Richard home, and—attempting to hide their relationship from the major—the pair take Aroon everywhere. Delighted when the handsome Richard invites himself into her bedroom, Aroon is bitterly disappointed when his interest goes no farther than noisy conversation (intended for the Major's ears). Aroon comforts herself with the knowledge that they behaved beautifully, and years after Richard's death asserts, "I can never look on myself as a deprived, inexperienced girl. I've had a man in my bed" (GB, 107). "You are a woman if you have had a lover in your bed," she concluded (GB, 172), building the only acceptable woman's story—the bildungsroman—where a man's love validates a woman's life.

Clare Boylan's *Holy Pictures*, set in 1925, gently ridicules a Catholic, Dublin society where Protestants and Jews "doomed to hell" are matters of curiosity and pity, "In-dividuality" is a sin, and Moving Pictures are fast replacing Holy Pictures.11 It's a bewildering world for fourteen-year-old Nan Cantwell, whose

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beloved, but utterly detached, mother pretends dependence on her husband, as did Mrs. St. Charles, and is equally committed to her own version of good behavior. When the ignorant and frightened Nan gets her first period, her Jewish friends inform her that she’s not ill but has become a woman, a passing they celebrate with wine. Returning home, Nan asks her mother for assistance, but her mother refuses, shocked that Nan would broach the subject of menstruation. “‘If your father should hear you speak of such things,’” Mrs. Cantwell exclaims, alert as always to her “duty” to protect her husband and oblivious to her daughter’s needs (HP, 84).

Boylan dwells more than Keane on the brutality beneath the chivalrous pretenses, but the novel is filled with surprise and laughter. Mr. Cantwell boasts of the “poor buggers” he has rescued, the women he has saved, clothed, and given jobs in his Cantwell Corset factory. On first visiting the factory, Nan and her sister Mary are horrified to see the women—and working children—in rags, the working conditions squalid. The girls remark the ragged clothing and Cantwell amends: “‘They are decent where it matters. I have made each of my ladies a present of the Cantwell’” (HP, 109). Nan challenges social hypocrisies and her father’s edicts with courage and common sense, but quails before the iron determination of her mother. School is a place for children, her mother announces, dismissing Nan’s dream of attending university.

No Mate for the Magpie, the story of Ann Elizabeth McGlone, set in the North in the early 1950’s, opens in a seemingly traditional manner, with Ann’s birth. Tradition, however, only highlights Ann’s originality, as she tells her story in a working-class northern dialect. “Way a wee screwed up protestant face an’ a head of black hair a was born, in a state of original sin. Me ma didn’t like me, but who’s te blame the poor woman, sure a didn’t look a catholic wain atall.” Ann starts her life in a drawer and proceeds from there to tackle institutions of church, state, and business. She first encounters sin while preparing for First Communion, but once acquainted, she finds it difficult to avoid,

especially sins of the flesh, touchin’ the body—which was the biggest sin of them all. . . . I really did try, but it was hard—especially whenever a had to go te the lavatory, but a managed all right for a while, then this itch started an’ a had to scratch it. It would of done no good gettin’ somebody else te scratch it for me because that was a sin as well. (NMFM, 10)

After a spell working in a factory, Ann sizes up her situation and decides to take control:

A could see that me ma an’ da had their plans laid, for me te carry on workin’ in the factory till a married wan of these boyos, an’ a wanted none of it. A decided than an’ there that a might as well do some good in the worl’ instead, but a must of been headin’ in the wrang direction for a ended up in a convent. (NMFM, 72-73)

The most unlikely nun ever, Ann doesn’t last long at this or any of the menial, hard jobs available. She joins the civil rights marchers in 1968. Beaten severely,
she is sorry for the "polisman, because a knew tha the was only tryin’ to do hes
duty be upholdin’ the laws that were made for all of us be the acutely deranged,
imbecilic, illegitimate, offspring of the mother of parliaments [i.e., the former
Northern Irish parliament at Stormont]" (NMFM, 138). Moving to Dublin, she
finds the work no better, the mores as hypocritical, the police as stupid. Thrown
out of digs and job because of demonstrating against the Vietnam war, Ann walks
around Dublin observing the condition of the vulnerable—poor, children and
outsiders—in Dublin, and decides to leave Ireland "an' go to a place where life
resembled life more than it did here" (NMFM, 170). Ann’s departure is not flight
in the sense that Johnston’s characters fled, but a brave search for a more
congenial place in which to direct her own life.

The political, economic, and educational systems in these novels privilege
men at the expense of women, yet the three individual fathers are more nurturing
of their daughters than any of the mothers. Major Aroon wills Aroon the home
property so she can be independent of her spiteful mother; Mr. Cantwell comforts
Nan when she confides her ambition to attend university; and Mr. McGlone
ensures Ann’s release first from the nunnery and then from the mental hospital,
not by the expense of their daughters at any of the mothers. Major Aroon wills Aroon the home
property so she can be independent of her spiteful mother; Mr. Cantwell comforts
Nan when she confides her ambition to attend university; and Mr. McGlone

**DARKER FAMILY PORTRAITS** of incestuous, brutal fathers and negligent, abandoning
mothers are drawn by Leland Bardwell in “The Dove of Peace,” Dorothy Nelson
in *In Night’s City*, and Jennifer Johnston in *The Invisible Worm*. All the writers
emphasize the fragile nature of the child’s ego, the need for love and acceptance
which makes parental manipulation so easy. Sharing a bedroom with her sister
Columbine, the dove of peace, Jessica is disturbed each night by noises that
“cause knots of terror to gather in her stomach. Yet somehow she knew that she
must not call out to make known that she was awake.” At some point she
realizes: “It was only Daddy, who came up to give Columbine a goodnight kiss,
to hold her soft body in his arms, reassure her of his love” (DOP, 11). After her
mother is sent to a mental institution and Columbine becomes pregnant, Jessica
understands what she has seen. “Is that why Mammy went mad?” she asks
Columbine. “No, no. She was mad first, Daddy says. Always always mad.”
Jessica confesses her hatred for her father and pity for her mother but Columbine
can only say, “‘Poor Daddy,’” and insists, “‘It’s my fault, Jessica. He couldn’t
help it’” (DOP, 19). When she finds the bodies of Columbine and her new-born
baby, Jessica is plunged into a tunnel of darkness and ends up in the mental
hospital in which her mother died.

Dorothy Nelson structures *In Night’s City* through surrealistic stream-of­
consciousness. Sara sleeps in the same room with her mother and father, so
neither mother nor daughter can shut out the scenes. Esther hates her husband as
much for his violations and beatings of herself as for his molesting of their

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daughter. Esther “escapes” into dreams of revenge; Sara, into schizophrenia, where not she but her other self, Maggie, endures her father’s molestation:

The laughin’ came closer. ‘I’m not three-and-a-half. I just told you, i’m four now.’ He tickled me again an’ I was laughin’ into his colours. Then it was dark. I felt the Dark touchin’ me funny an’ I was cryin’ so Maggie came an’ he touched Maggie funny not me. Not me. Not me. Not me. 14

Jennifer Johnston’s earlier works often remark the injustice of the colonial encounter in Ireland; The Invisible Worm reveals the injustice of the post-colonial Republic, where the Anglo-Irish community is shrunked, its institutions neglected. Laura, the middle-aged, Protestant daughter of a mixed marriage, lives with her husband, Maurice Quinlan, a recluse in her dead mother’s house. Maurice, warned by Laura’s father, sees his wife as “a bit unstable.” 15 Laura’s illness, however, comes from repressing the memory of being raped by her father, a popular politician, when she was fifteen. Once again, the guilt falls on the daughter: “‘Why did you do this to me?’” are his first words after the rape. “‘Think of your mother,’” he threatens Laura. “‘She will go. Leave us. . . . Hate you. Leave you’” (TIW, 157). And indeed Laura’s mother first refuses to believe or comfort Laura, then commits suicide. The invisible worm represents the incestuous sickness in the Irish domestic and national scene where the Anglo-Irish mother abandons her daughter and the Gaelic-Irish father endows her with the madness and guilt of the encounter.

It is worth noting that Laura, Johnston’s most recent heroine, does not flee the scene of her trauma. Dominic, the ex-priest who loves and is loved by Laura, pleads with her to leave Ireland with him. Her memory restored, Laura knew that this house of her mother is where she wishes to be. She refuses the romantic closure of dependence, opting instead to remain, her future “an empty page” (TIW, 181) on which she will write her life. She becomes an independent woman, who will remain within an inimical society, yet chart her own course. 16

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MY ATTEMPT TO BE descriptive has necessarily meant proscribing the themes in Irish women’s fiction. Before concluding, I would like to suggest something of its range. Women’s “escape” into madness as a response to stifling gender and economic restrictions has already been suggested, but Evelyn Conlon’s harrowing accounts of ordinary women driven to the edge in My Head is Opening (1987) should be noted especially. Frances Molloy, whose short stories deserve to be collected, treats wife and child abuse in a chilling, blackly humorous story, “Women Are the Scourge of the Earth,” and in “An Irish Fairy Tale,” she

16. Other relevant texts include Edna O’Brien’s first novel, The Country Girls (1960), with its exploration of a rural girl’s relationship to her mother and father, and her Night (1972), which focuses on the mother/son relationship. Julia O’Faolain presents a variety of marriages in Man in the Cellar (1974), No Country for Young Men (1980), and The Obedient Wife (1982). Works dealing with mother/daughter friendship or golden childhoods include Clare Boylan’s “A Little Girl, Never Out Before” in her collection of stories, Concerning Virgins (1989) and Alice Taylor’s lovely story/memoirs, To School Through the Fields (1988), Quench the Lamp (1990), and The Village (1992), and Polly Devlin’s All of Us There (1983).
nominates as “the patron saint of woman beaters” Kevin, the saint who won acclaim by drowning his temptress. Dolores Walshe treats abortion in “East of Ireland;” Eilis Ní Dhuibhne’s “Midwife to the Fairies” is a classic and haunting story of infanticide. Environmental concerns play a strong part in Ní Dhuibhne’s The Bray House, and Catherine Brophy engages playfully with science fiction in Dark Paradise. Bridget O’Connor’s Here Comes John is a frank and very contemporary treatment of female living and loving. The Female Line: Northern Irish Women Writers and Wildish Things are superb collections of new fiction and poetry.17

Other writers focus on the emotional conflicts which often seem part of mother-daughter relationships. Helen Lucy Burke’s “A Season for Mothers” (1980), a bitterly funny story, records a mother’s smothering of her daughter’s independence. When the new widow Mrs. MacMahon visits her working daughter in Rome, she criticizes everything foreign, from Martha’s friends to her food. Martha restrains her own temper, thinking to endure patiently the two-week visit and not immediately alert to Mrs. MacMahon’s ominous airport announcement: “‘Never again. . . . I prayed, and here I am. But never again. Not if I have to spend the rest of my life here.’”18 Mrs. MacMahon condemns with begrudging praise: “‘Well, you certainly live in style. In style. . . . Far too grand for the likes of me,’” (SFM, 7). Similar self-pitying admiration greets Martha’s every effort to entertain. But there’s nothing meek about this priest-loving woman. She insults Martha’s friends, steals her daughter’s alcohol and cigarettes for the alcoholic Father Maher, and—pleading that she needs no entertaining—gets exactly what she wants, daily visits to St. Peter’s. Small-minded, snobbish, selfish, Mrs. MacMahon wins our smiles if not sympathy as she fantasizes that her devotion will attract the Pope’s attention:

‘We would see her. Take her to Us.’ Then the slender white figure raising her from the ground, the dark eyes smiling into hers. ‘Your faith edifies Us, daughter.’ A little conversation then about how she was only a simple Irish widow who had never stirred away from her kitchen until her husband died. ‘You can cook, daughter? We have need of you.’ (SFM, 12)

The humor barely covers the harsh realities. The will to dominate her daughter is prompted by loneliness and fear. “The thought of returning to the silent house in Dublin made Mrs. MacMahon sick with terror” (SFM, 23). Martha makes many resolutions to forgive, realizing that her mother has to “feel necessary to be something, even if it is only to be a leech” (SFM, 28). Like so many of the women we’ve already met, Mrs. MacMahon sees her own value in being necessary to others and automatically condemns Martha’s independence, her


lack of ties. That Martha achieves this independence despite being raised in the
system which produced her mother is a measure of her willpower, courage, and
intelligence. Yet, she—decades after Boylan’s Nan—is unable to extricate
herself from the trap of her mother’s emotional blackmail. Despairingly, she
realizes that stuck with her mother and Father Maher, she will be forced into a
shrunken, miserable life, similar to that of her mother.

The characters in Mary Lavin’s “A Family Likeness” (1985) are more
sympathetic. The elderly Ada lives with her daughter, Laura, Laura’s husband
and four-year-old daughter, Daff. Laura and Ada care deeply for each other, but,
despite or because of this, they annoy and irritate each other constantly. The
women are so familiar that each responds not to the other’s words, but to the
history and implications she “knows” the words connote. Despite their certainty
of a shared past, each is an individual and therefore perceives and “knows” a
different history. As Ada, Daff and Laura take a walk, the tired Laura treats Ada’s
comments as criticism of herself or her husband. When Ada suggests they
shorten their walk—a suggestion she makes because she believes Laura is
tired—Laura is immediately penitent and in turn suggests that her mother sit
down while she takes Daff farther:

Ada’s heart was pierced with sadness. Had her daughter seen that she was failing? She, who up to
such a short time ago had been indefatigable, possessed indeed of far more energy than Laura herself
had ever enjoyed. ‘I don’t want to sit down, Laura,’ she said. With a pang she remembered the way
her own mother had laid a querulous emphasis on some words.19

The reading and misreading continues, showing the “Family Likeness” to be
deeply embedded in perspective, attitude, and gesture, a cultural legacy as strong
or stronger than any genetic tie. Many Lavin stories register with great subtlety
this blurring of ego boundaries between mother and daughter.20 The blurring is
one reason so many daughters unthinkingly follow their mother’s patterns, and
the reason so many intelligent women cannot escape maternal blackmail.

* * *

A FINAL DEVELOPMENT of note is the focus on lesbian love and sexuality by a group
of young writers. The contributions of Attic Press are worth remarking here.
Attic began as a feminist press publishing some of the fiction already mentioned,
as well as political and social analyses and reference works. In 1994, Attic
launched Basement Press, which publishes irreverent fiction and non-fiction by
women and men, and includes the first gay series in Ireland, “Queer Views.”

The early work of Linda Cullen, Emma Donoghue, and Mary Dorcey presents
a variety of lesbian experience. Cullen’s The Kiss (1990) charts the unexpected-
ness and joy of a young woman discovering her sexuality:


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Helen was amazed at all she still didn’t know about her friend after so long, and wanted now to discover everything about her. . . .
And Joanna thought too of what Helen didn’t know and was surprised at herself for being able to tell her some of her deepest fears. . . .
‘Joanna?’
‘Yes?’
‘When did you know?’
‘About this?’ Joanna asked. . . .
‘I didn’t.’ Joanna smiled. . . . ‘I didn’t know at all.’

Emma Donoghue’s *Stir-Fry* (1994) takes us on a journey through changing Dublin with Maria, an innocent seventeen-year-old spending her first year away from home. Despite disappointing friendships with men, Maria never questions her own heterosexuality and is shocked to discover that the flat mates she enjoys are lesbian lovers. We watch Maria tussle with her loyalties to her friends and her preconceptions of love, her own position becoming clear as she explains and argues with her up-tight friend Yvonne. ‘What’s to keep you there?’ Yvonne nags Maria, encouraging her to leave the flat immediately. ‘For one thing,’’ Maria answers, ‘‘I like them.’’ ‘‘But they’re hardly your sort. I mean, don’t you find them a bit, you know?’’ ‘A bit what?’ Maria asks. ‘‘Butch and ranty,’’ Yvonne replies, exposing not only her prejudice, for she has not met Maria’s flat mates, but more importantly, playing out Maria’s own unexamined perception. Maria’s awakening to her lesbian consciousness is subtly portrayed.

To round out this brief survey of themes in Irish women’s fiction, I come again to the writer I quoted first, Mary Dorcey. Her short-story collection *A Noise from the Woodshed* (1989) explores and celebrates a variety of lesbian loving. The difficulty many women have in claiming their sexuality, the justified fear of the responses of family, friends, and society is a theme here as well as in the three works just discussed. In “Introducing Nessa,” Sheila, divorced and the mother of a daughter, finds joy and freedom in loving Nessa. The “strangeness,” she remembers, addressing Nessa in her imagination, “was only that there was none. Where had I learnt my knowledge of you? In what hidden part of my being had I stored it?” But from the beginning, Sheila hides Nessa, hides her own desire and cripples herself into an acceptable shape.

Given contemporary society, Sheila’s response is understandable. But Dorcey depicts other women delighting openly in their sexuality, and moving to Viney’s concept of “redesigning personal lives and relationships.” The title story is a song of this delight, a celebration of the wonderful day when two women met, helped each other cross the river, fell down among the poppies, loved and ignored for a time all the pain and injustice in the world. Yes, the story concludes, it was a magical day.

And more and more women are having them—days that is—snatched from drought and the torrents of life. More and more women riding about footloose, tongue loose and fancy free, crossing the river when they come to it: the deep, rushing tide, keeping their heads well above water and gaining the bank; they lie down where the grass lies green and growing in wait all round, lie down where the yellow iris waves in wait, the wild poppies blow and, a cuckoo—yes, it was unmistakably from over the heather—a cuckoo calls. (NFW, 21-22)

The themes in the women’s work presented here are the themes remarked by one reader, but these themes are also important concerns in women’s conversations. In the short span of two decades, there has been a movement from awareness of gender injustice, to action, and most recently to attempts to remake society in new and fairer shapes. I do not mean to suggest that a large percentage, or even number, of Irish women have signed on to the new visions suggested by the lesbian writers; the stories of mother/daughter entanglements suggest otherwise. What we can say is that the work of women writers over the past two decades dramatically increases the variety in the gallery of ordinary Irish women.

Works Cited


