

Florida Southern College

Honors Directed Study

Importance of the Past:

The Cathartic Effect of Reliving Memories in Female Irish Short Stories

Rebekah Green

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“They carried their sorrow—not with photos under their arms, not with wailing, or by beating their chests, but with weariness around the eyes. Mothers and daughters and children and grandmothers, too. They never fought the wars, but they suffered them, blood and bone.”

-- Colum McCann.

## **Introduction**

Trauma is deeply embedded in Irish history and, subsequently, Irish literature and culture. In both literature and psychology, scholars note that the “colonization by the English over 900 years is a given, underpinning the relationship between the two modern states and their people(s)” (Thornton 287). The tension between Northern Ireland and the Republic, and the ongoing and only recently acknowledged anguish experienced by the nation caused by the Troubles, has become a permanent fixture in Irish cultural identity. Classic Irish texts examine nationalism, loyalty, and religious identity, all aspects that directly tie into the “multigenerational trauma” that is recognized by historians as an ongoing theme, both implicit and explicit, in Irish literature (Downes 583).

In addition to multigenerational trauma, Ireland also has a strongly embedded patriarchal nationalism that extends back to colonization. During the turmoil of English colonialism, Ireland was typically depicted as a mother-figure and a fertile woman, who was both available to be conquered by England and in need of Irish defense from such violation. Much of the rhetoric surrounding eighteenth-century nationalism in Ireland relies on this style of imagery to incite male support in “protecting an imperiled femininity against invasion” (Higgins 18). As a result of the dichotomy between the English desire for ownership and the Irish desire for freedom, women were left on the outskirts, for even though the fight for independence was centered on gendered language, women had no real voice in the matter. Female nationalism in Ireland relied on the homestead as a source of power, which was limited, but also limiting, to women.

The trauma of colonial discourse fell two-fold upon Irish women, an effect that is still evident in contemporary Irish literature. Even though social trauma has always played a significant role in Irish literature, Katherine Costello-Sullivan, a professor of Irish literature at Le Moyne College, notes that “twenty-first-century Irish narratives increasingly turn from just recognizing traumatic experiences toward also exploring and representing the process of healing and recovery, interrogating this possibility from the vantage of the authors’ time and place” (3). The most evident shift in this recognition of trauma can be seen in short stories by Irish women. A demographic traditionally limited in political and social voice, women in Ireland have finally begun a climb out of patriarchal non-recognition that extends into the realm of authorship and publication in a genre that has been available to women when others have not. Literary scholars are drawing attention to the gaping hole that women in the genre deserve to fill, in both the discussion of canonical and contemporary Irish literature. Since 2016 the genre of Irish short stories has seen an increase in demand and acclaim for female authors, especially in Northern Ireland. *The Irish Times* proclaimed that the year 2016 saw “female writers from the North take over the short story scene with a diverse array of tales told well” (Magennis). The *Post Irish Book Awards* also recognized this same accolade; established in 2016, it is the only literary award supported by all Irish bookstores, and in 2018 it recognized mostly female authors (Moran 17). With the shift in attention comes not only growing literary acclaim for a historically limited demographic, but also the possibility for discussion and healing for women in their texts and as a whole.

The modern Irish short story is important to women writers because of its history and its form. The contemporary short story is heavily influenced by the most common oral tradition, the *seanchai* tale, in two ways: the interaction between the imaginary and reality, and the first-person

perspective (Houston 72). The first influence, the thematic infusion of local history with folklore and imaginary beings, is directly parallel to the theme of memory and manipulation. Memory is the combination of history, or telling it as it happened, and fiction, or telling it as if it happened, just as the *seanchai* story allows the narrator to mix fact and fiction into a fluid narrative that is self-sufficient, the construction of memory creates a new version of truth persists regardless of the technical facts retained by cultural memory (Pederson 2).

The first-person point of view in *seanchai* narrative also directly translates to modern short stories. In the *seanchai* orations, the stories take place in first-person active, as if the narrator were there for the event, even in instances where it would not be feasible for the narrator to be physically present. These first-person accounts were typically a personal delivery of a general cultural history, whereas the modern short story is commonly a recount of personal histories that also relate unifying cultural themes. Despite this difference in content, both narratives retain an uncertainty regarding the circumstances of narration (Mercer 98; Kiberd 14; Averill 20). This uncertainty aligns closely with the theme of memory and its circumstantial qualities.

In addition to its close ties to oral tradition, the short story also has significant ties to female writing. As a genre, it has been identified as the “natural progression” of other forms of writing historically associated with women, such as letter-writing, storytelling, and dairy-keeping (Casey 9). The easy shift from oral narration to the short story, as noted above, has specific implications for Irish female authors. According to Irish playwright and novelist Frank O’Conner, the short story is “a vital expressive tool for the “submerged population’ of a country... in a post-colonial state” (20). The form provides a freedom and a space for female authors that they have utilized to explore personal and historical traumas.

## Memory

Episodic memory is defined as “a system of memory that is concerned with the encoding, storage, and retrieval of discrete past events” that is “autobiographical in nature, meaning that it involves an individual’s own experiences and perceptions of what happened where and when, as well as one’s consciousness of remembering and subjective sense of time” (Phillips). Therefore, episodic memory is a two-part process: there is the initial act of retrieval, which requires recalling events of the past, and there is the act of re-contextualization, which places the recalled memory into a context that recognizes a difference in temporal space between when a memory or an event originally occurred and when it is being remembered.

Clinical psychologist Soren Ekstrom argues that the initial stage of recall, that of retrieval, requires a form of self-reflection that relies heavily on the current state of being when recalling a memory (Ekstrom 53). Episodic memory emphasizes the interpretation or processing of a memory rather than the factuality of an experience; in other words, the most important part of recall is the memory of an event that we create for ourselves, rather than the actual event or experience. How we remember an event is dependent on how we process—or refuse to process—it and whether or not it has an ongoing influence on our day-to-day lives. The dilemma with traumatic memory recall is that the memories themselves may be skewed due to the traumatic nature. This, it is possible that the traumatic memories themselves were originally stored falsely, and the recalling of such memories further convolutes the original event (Appelbaum 4). However, this reinforces the theory that the stored memory, even traumatic memory, within the brain is more relevant and important than the factual events that created the memory.

By definition, catharsis is the discharge of previously repressed affects connected to traumatic events that occurs when these events are brought back into consciousness and reexperienced (VandenBos 153). When recalling a traumatic memory, the recollection is actively bringing the events back into mind; both the act of recalling and re-contextualizing a memory allows for the possibility of reexperiencing an event and therefore allows for cathartic reaction to occur.

In literature, memory is a recurring theme throughout genre, regionality, and authorship. In a literary context, memory as a concrete concept is used to construct the past. As Irish scholar Julia Kuntz notes, “the function of memory is to give the narrator access to the past; it also inevitably means that he can manipulate it” (Kuntz 108). Award-winning historian Guy Beiner addresses the manipulability of memory as a part of the re-contextualization process, which is essential to memory recall (Beiner 315). When applied to literary memory recall, re-contextualization extends the ability of manipulation to both the author and the narrator. This includes the act of assuming other people’s memories as personal ones. Even though he or she is using outside memories as personal ones, the rememberer is still participating in a form of self-reflection like in ordinary memory recall; however, this self-reflection relies heavily on retrieving an account of another person’s past and refiguring it into a personal context. Just as with episodic memory, there can be alterations in how a memory is stored and recalled by changes in factual detail or focal shifts, especially since the recall is secondary rather than personal. But this does not negate the relevance or impact of a memory on sense of self, nor the ability for a memory to cause a cathartic reaction.

While memory has always been a recurring them in Irish literature, the treatment of memory and the act and result of memory recall has shifted in contemporary Irish short stories,

specifically those by female authors. Elizabeth Bowen's "The Happy Autumn Fields" is an example of women who attempt to escape through recovering memories; the contemporary texts, Roisin O'Donnell's "Ebenezer's Memories" and Bernie McGill's "Islander" show women using memories as a form of narrative psychotherapy. These women are able to process or begin processing trauma through purposefully reliving memories and therefore have the opportunity to achieve a form of cathartic healing. The shift of thematic treatment in the genre shows a change in cultural and socio-political status for Irish women as a whole.

### **"The Happy Autumn Fields"**

Bowen's "The Happy Autumn Fields" is perhaps the most imaginative yet literal example of memory's ability to transport the rememberer. The story is divided into four sections. In the first section, Bowen's narrative starts off in a rather conventional manner: she sets the scene, detailing the dynamic of Sarah's family and her beloved sister, Henrietta. The wording there serves as clear foreshadowing for the remainder of the work:

It was *Sarah* who saw the others ahead on the blond stubble, who *knew* them, *knew* what they were to each other, *knew* their names and *knew* her own. It was *she* who heard it give beneath the tread of the others a continuous different more distant soft stiff crunch. (671, my emphasis)

Sarah repeatedly insists that she knows the details of her family and their relations, which is odd since knowing about one's relatives seems expected. By the end of the first section, however, it becomes clear that something is amiss. The final paragraph shifts points of view, from third-person to first-person, as Bowen uses "we" and "our" rather than "she." The unprecedented shift adds to the brewing chaos and fracturing reality that colors the remaining sections of the narrative.

The second section of the narrative starts with a shock of pain that takes the reader to a different century and to the “real” main character, Mary. It is revealed that Mary lives during the London Blitzes at the beginning of World War II and has uncovered Sarah’s journal while sorting through the belongings of a decrepit family home. Just as her physical world is immersed in the chaos of war, Mary’s identity is also suffering from instability. While the rest of the narrative takes place in the third-person, the stability of the narrator is questionable because of the switches between “Mary” and “Sarah.” These alternations reveal that Mary believes she is Sarah and that she is slowly losing her own identity. She interacts with her husband, Travis, in a distant manner and rejects his loving affection. Her reason for rejecting him is because she does not fully identify as Mary, which is evidenced in the following quotation.

His possessive fondness was part, of course, of the story of him and Mary, which like a book once read she remembered clearly but with indifference... she all but afforded a smile at the grotesquerie of being saddled with Mary’s body and lover.  
(677)

Mary’s denial of self, both of her emotional state and her physical body, indicates that Mary is experiencing a split in identity. The entire second section of the text revolves around Mary interacting with her surroundings from a removed perspective, claiming that “she yawned into Mary’s hand” and “tried and failed, to unbutton the bosom of Mary’s dress” (678). When Travis shows her a picture of Sarah’s face, Mary undergoes a shock at having seen her for the first time. It is apparent that Mary believes herself to be Sarah and views her own actions as a spectator rather than a participant. Having that fact rejected by physical evidence is a further blow to her concept of self.

The narrative continues alternating between these two women's perspectives, both of which are presented through a third-person objective point of view. Rotating the point of view emphasizes a sense of confusion and merging identity as Mary adopts Sarah's emotions more and more with each dream, and assumes Sarah's life as her own. Mary experiences vivid emotions while she is submerged in Sarah's persona. Her devotion to her sister, Henrietta, extends so far that she claims she would rather die than be separated from her; the love she feels for her family is unquestionable, and her adoration for her prospective suitor, Eugene, is so thoroughly pervasive in her thoughts and actions that there can be no doubt that her emotional attachments are full-fledged and deeply rooted.

However, Mary still feels the instability of her reality as Sarah. She claims to feel a sense of dislocation, as though she does not belong in Sarah's world or her own. In the third section of the text, she desperately tries to communicate to Sarah's family her loneliness and an apprehension that "the seconds were numbered" (Bowen 681). The cracks continue to disrupt her existence, and she is torn from her life as Sarah one last time. Mary's shifting point of view, from that of "Mary" to "Sarah," can be viewed as a dream-state and manifestation of her escapist fantasy. The changes in identity come while Mary is asleep, but Mary's dreams are more accurately Sarah's memories. Mary acquires the memories from an old box of pictures and letters that once belonged to Sarah and her relatives. Mary relives these memories while in a dream state by adopting the memories as her own. Throughout the narrative, Sarah shows an awareness of her family's emotions that would not be possible without prior knowledge. Her awareness is due to the changing point of view; Mary is using Sarah's written memories to create her alternate reality and persona.

In the final section of the story, Mary is brought back to her present-day reality and faces the harsh fact that she can no longer live in Sarah's memories. She reflects on the events of her dream state, claiming:

What has happened is cruel: I am left with a fragment torn out of a day, a day that I don't even know where or when; and now how am I to help laying that like a pattern against the poor stuff of everything else? – Alternatively, I am a person drained by a dream. (684)

Mary reluctantly returns to her reality and accepts that she cannot be Sarah or live Sarah's life. She experiences a shocking release from her dream-state and returns to a single identity. Even though Mary is able to reestablish her identity, she still feels the weight of Sarah's memories on both her mind and her identity. In the end, she is left with an unrelenting hopelessness in her own reality.

### **“Islander”**

Much like Bowen's work, Bernie McGill's “Islander” relies on the instability and of the narrator. The short story begins with the narrator, Sarah, on a train. Sarah claims that while on the train she meets a young girl of similar age:

Impossibly, she crosses her legs... we both look out the window. In the darkening air outside, our eyes meet in the glass, somewhere near Balnamore, over the fairy tree where the black goat is grazing. And this is what she tells me with her eyes. (McGill 66)

The story that is told is about a girl who has recently lost her boyfriend, Charlie, in a tragic car accident. The couple are on their way to meet Charlie's parents when they spin out of control; the girl awakens in a hospital, only to find out that Charlie is dead and that she is carrying his

unborn child. This tragic tale is presented to the reader as the past of the strange young woman on the train. The girl is never given a name, and the only description of her physical appearance is her proximity in age to the narrator. After telling her story to Sarah, the girl disappears off the train, and then suddenly reappears in the reflection of the train window. The sudden appearance and disappearance of the girl, both at the beginning and end of the story, indicates that the girl is not a real person. Instead, the strange girl is actually a manifestation of Sarah, and the story-transmission that takes place is a type of pseudo-self-reflection rather than a physical human interaction. Under this interpretation, it is clear that the harsh memories being told by the stranger really belong to Sarah.

The shift in perspective may be explained as a form of disassociation that Sarah undergoes in order to confront her past. The American Psychological Association (“APA”) defines a dissociated state as “a reaction to a traumatic event in which the individual splits the components of the event into those that can be faced in the present and those that are too harmful to process” (VandenBos 290). For Sarah, her loss and grief are so strong that in order to be able to process them, she must look at her personal life experiences as though they were the story of a random stranger on a train. The explanation for her projecting her past onto an imaginary third person becomes clearer when looking at her intentions.

The APA states that a dissociated state can be improved by introspection, which is a purposeful act of self-reflection that attempts to process trauma (VandenBos 499). Sarah clearly has some form of recognition that her act of reliving memories is for the purpose of healing or growth. She claims “the train is carrying [her] away,” but that it is also “heading towards the thing that is going to happen” (McGill 65). This reveals the extent of the purpose of Sarah’s train ride: escaping the past, and purposefully moving forward to something new. Since Sarah’s goal

is more than just an evasion of her past, she is destined to encounter some form of change from her current state.

When the random girl enters onto the train, the narrator recognizes the significance of her presence, stating “here comes the thing that is going to happen” immediately before the girl boards (McGill 66). This serves as an acknowledgement from Sarah that she will be facing the “thing” in her life that she has yet to deal with. The trauma of losing her boyfriend in an accident leaves a permanent mark on Sarah’s life moving forward; but, by facing the situation and recounting the details of the accident, Sarah is actively attempting to process and heal from the event. Despite never textually admitting to projecting her own reality onto a phantom form, Sarah does finally indicate a merging of the two identities. She feels the kick of her unborn child in the last paragraph of the text which solidifies her identity as the girl in the reflection. Sarah leaves the train with a form of strength that leads her to have hope for the futures of both herself and her child. The final words the girl says before disappearing are “we carry the living, and we do whatever it takes to wake the dead” (McGill 71). Rather than a sense of unrelenting despair, the reader is left with the sense that Sarah will continue living in order to honor the dead and to give her child a chance at life. Telling her story allows for Sarah to have a form of cathartic release, which results in her final, singular identity and an emotional relief that is not present at the start of the story.

### **“Ebenezer’s Memories”**

Roisín O’Donnell’s “Ebenezer’s Memories” explores the way in which trauma can be transmitted intergenerationally. The story centers on Catherine, who as an adult is reflecting on her childhood visits with her grandparents. Catherine’s parents, who are from Northern Ireland, left Derry in order to escape condemnation for their “mixed marriage”—i.e., Catholic and

Protestant. However, Catherine frequently makes visits to her grandparents' house in Derry as a child, which in turn exposes her to the political and social discord of the Troubles that her parents had hoped to leave behind.

During one such visit to her grandparents' home, Cathy's brother accidentally locks himself in an old cupboard. In order to dissuade the children from going into the cabinet, their grandfather weaves the tale of a monster, Ebenezer, that eats memories from the newspaper that he feeds him daily. However, Ebenezer quickly becomes a tangible, breathing being in Cathy's mind. As a six-year-old, she believes that the cupboard holds a memory-eater that intermittently spits out memories of the past. During subsequent visits, Cathy encounters Ebenezer multiple times.

With each encounter, she goes through a form of hypnosis, as though sitting in front of a projector that she cannot escape, and watches memories of her grandparents, of her father, and of Northern Ireland during a time of war and turmoil: "I felt a sudden dizziness, and dots of blue danced before my eyes, like the wake of a camera flash. Blue turned to blazing white and then cleared into light-filled images. It was as if the moving pictures were being projected inside my eyelids from an invisible cinema reel" (7). Each memory is more violent and specific than the last. These memories are real ones, which she herself has not lived but that she has overheard since a young age; the way in which they manifest in her mind, however, are as memories spit out by a scary monster rather than personal or familial recollections.

Catherine's ability to relive memories that are not her own through Ebenezer serves two purposes. First, it enables her to have access to knowledge that she otherwise would not have to. She is neither present during her grandfather's service in the army, nor is she there when her father is brutally murdered in the street. Ebenezer gives her the ability to piece these memories

together in a form of recontextualization. This aligns with editor and author Dr. Mickey Pearlman's analysis of recontextualization, which takes Beiner's concept further by addressing the "comfort and discomfort associated with the past as it manifests itself in the present" (Pearlman 139).

Catherine is tasked with this restoration, piecing together the scraps of family history she has overheard since she was young. The memories presented to the reader are, therefore, multilayered: they originate from family members other than Catherine herself, they have been reformatted to fit her own narrative and memory, and they are told in the context of an adult Catherine reviewing her childhood. The interwoven structures that take part in recontextualization can easily become convoluted, which shows the instability of memory when processed multiple times.

The second purpose that Catherine's ability to relive memories through Ebenezer serves is reconciliation, both with her trauma and with self-blame. Up until the summer of 1998, she sees the social conflict of the Troubles as something "confined to the six o'clock news" (O'Donnell 10). Once she begins to see its influence on her own life, she imagines Ebenezer slithering out of his cupboard cage. She feels guilt when she starts to see the violence directly affect her way of life in the wake of Ebenezer's release, believing that she caused his freedom and therefore his chaos. Catherine confronts her grandfather with her guilt, claiming she is the reason that people are suffering. He comforts her by saying that, though Ebenezer goes away on vacation, he always comes back.

Although Catherine never encounters Ebenezer again as a child, she still has some form of belief in him as an adult. Rather than a living thing, Ebenezer becomes a representation of memories and the time she spent at her grandfather's house. When she visits the house of her

childhood as a grown woman, she *feels* the presence of Ebenezer rather than her being drawn unavoidably into his memories. He gifts her with one last memory, a happy one of her grandfather, before disappearing forever.

The change in Ebenezer's memories and Catherine's perception of him shows the growth that Catherine experiences from her childhood to her adulthood. At a young age, she has her father ripped away from her due to ongoing political discord that she cannot understand, and she sees the influence that such violence and war has had on her family. The trauma that she faces is more indirect than physical; she must cope with loss and attempt to find an identity for herself in the midst of chaos. As an adult, she still feels "lost between worlds" and torn between the religious and cultural identities of her parents, and she recognizes that the specific details surrounding her father's murder will forever be "an incomplete memory" (20). But with this recognition also comes acceptance, and acceptance is her cathartic release. Although she still feels doubt toward her self-identity, she accepts that the troubled past of her grandparents and her parents are an integral part of who she is as a person, which helps her continue to work through her introspection.

### **The Difference in Catharsis**

All three works center on trauma. "The Happy Autumn Fields" has a narrator whose life is being physically and emotionally destroyed by World War II; "Islander" has a narrator who has lost her boyfriend and the father of her child in an automobile accident; and "Ebenezer's Memories" has a narrator whose father was murdered due to the political discord of Ireland during the Troubles. As these women attempt to reconcile with traumas in their life, they purposefully utilize memory as an aid to analyze their identity and sense of self.

In “Islander” and “Ebenezer’s Memories,” Sarah and Catherine use their memories as ways to grow. Trauma psychologist Cathy Caruth observes that the ability to recover the past, or to remember, is closely tied up with trauma, as both trauma and memory require some form of introspection (152). Sarah has an explicit recognition that her act of reliving her memory, albeit a memory projected onto a stranger, will result in some form of change. Catherine makes a conscious choice to return to her childhood home and encounter Ebenezer a final time, which results in her ability to see the good in her troubled past.

Bowen’s work does not have the same underlying motivation. In “The Happy Autumn Fields,” Mary is reliving the memories of Sarah for the purpose of avoiding her own life. Mary finds Sarah’s diary, whose memories and life she adopts as though they were her own. The only take on Sarah’s life available to Mary, then, is what she reads in the journal—all memories that reflect happiness, a stable environment and the promise of a fulfilling future. In her book *Elizabeth Bowen: A Study of the Short Fiction*, Phyllis Lassner argues that the identity of the two women are inherently inseparable; Mary and Sarah merge into one person, and “the movement back and forth gives the sense that yearning, violence, and losses of one era begin and end in the other and that each one can be understood only in the other’s light” (106). When Sarah is ripped from Mary, it is as though a part of herself is lost, making it impossible for her to ever reconcile her sense of self.

In Heather Ingman’s analysis of recurrent themes in Irish short stories, she notes that the genre “often registers clock time as an enemy, to be resisted or evaded through dreams and imagination. Characters might fantasize about escaping into a more liberated way of life, but all too often memory pulls them back into the past and they remain paralysed to act” (191). A large aspect of being pulled back into the past is the use of memory as an escape from the present.

According to author and professor Jessica Gildersleeve, “[M]emory . . . is a site of safety” that serves as a “coping mechanism . . . that becomes an escape from the present” (55). Both Ingman and Gildersleeve give evidence to Bowen’s work being one of escape rather than healing. In the instance of Mary, she hopes to escape from her own time because of the war. She actively seeks solace in memories of the past, and when that is ripped from her, she is unable to face her own reality without despair. She assumes the role of Sarah as an act of avoidance. This act, therefore, is futile in encouraging a cathartic reaction because Mary does not wish to confront her problems, but instead wants to hide from them.

### **Anglo-Irish influence**

The texts of this analysis are all considered to be Irish works. However, the main feature that classifies them as such, the nationality of authorship, is much more fluid and multifaceted than a simple, singular designation. The ambiguous delineations that define “Irish writing” are tumultuous and very rarely agreed upon, either by scholars or by the authors claiming—or being denied—space within the category. As a result, authors who identify as not wholly Irish but as a fusion of cultures, especially those who identify as Anglo-Irish, face a struggle with sense of self that is rooted in a confused national identity and that often bleeds into their works.

A prominent factor in the tension of Anglo-Irish identity is the expatriation of the demographic, by both the Irish and the English. Irish nationalism rejects the Anglo-Irish completely, regarding their dual-nationality as a betrayal to the mother and, therefore, as non-Irish. However, the reality of the Anglo-Irish populations’ own sense of self is much more complex than a simple yes or no answer to the question of “What is Irish?” In literature, there is a notable trope that has formed as a result of the expatriation of the Anglo-Irish, which is a choice between the “clichés of Anglo-Irish nostalgia, or . . . a self-consciously colonial class”

(Hughes 68). The nostalgia for a return to the homeland of Ireland is either denied or fulfilled, and within this trope the colonial discourse is recognized, and either disputed or reinforced by the very group that is, by name, involved in both sides of the discourse. As a result, the Anglo-Irish exist in a sort of limbo between two countries and two cultures inherently at odds with one another.

The unrest that is an essential part of the Anglo-Irish identity is magnified in the Anglo-Irish woman. According to Ingman, “the experience of being a foreigner in an alien culture was one shared by a fair proportion of Irish women in the twentieth century. Poverty, lack of employment, or simple inability to fit into the prevailing ethos of their nation forced many Irish women to emigrate during the course of the century” (Ingman 177). Women were essentially forced out of Ireland in droves; “Sharon Lambert gives the figures: between 1926 and 1951, 52,000 Irish women emigrated to the United states and a further 180,000 went to the United Kingdom” (179). The colonial language that Irish nationalism responds to, and ironically reinforces, also compounds the patriarchal rhetoric upon the women of Ireland, leaving them at odds with their homeland.

The Anglo-Irish female writer is perhaps the best example of this rejection or expulsion from the homeland. Just as a majority of Irish texts examine nationalism, loyalty, and religious identity, so do these women. They are faced with a unique and particular form of “multigenerational trauma” that is recognized in most Irish literature and form their own response to such trauma. The influence of the underlying tension of the Anglo-Irish identity can be seen in their works and in the ways in which they address generational trauma within their short stories.

**Elizabeth Bowen**

Elizabeth Bowen was born to Anglo-Irish parents in Dublin, Ireland where she spent her childhood years. After her father fell mentally ill in 1907, she moved with her mother to England until her mother's death in 1912. Bowen then spent the majority of her formative years alternating between her boarding school in Kent and her father's property at Bowen's Court in County Cork. Bowen felt the influence of World War I heavily on her childhood and lasting into her adulthood, especially in her early education at Downe House. She recognized the lasting impact of her time at the all-girls school, and the constant moral strain under which her and her classmates were instructed. As an adult she spent her time near Oxford, writing and socializing in an English atmosphere for the larger part of her adult life. Despite a change in location, Bowen was unable to escape the tumult of World War II.

As a result, much of Bowen's writing includes the tension of her own childhood and adulthood spent in the middle of two all-encompassing wars. Much of her work is also demonstrative of her Anglo-Irish heritage and the turmoil associated with it. Bowen writes of her Irish identity:

"As long as I can remember I've been extremely conscious of being Irish...

[G]oing backwards and forwards between Ireland and England... has never robbed me of a strong feeling of nationality. I must say," she added, "it's a highly

disturbing emotion." (Schneider 74-75)

The displacement caused by the feeling of being excepted in neither country in which she has roots is heavily influential in her personal life. Bowen served as a spy to the British Intelligence during World War II, despite her Irish heritage. The British wanted to use the Treaty Ports for an upper hand in the war even though their position with Ireland was supposed to remain neutral. Not an uncommon trend of the time, Bowen was hired to write reports on the Irish reaction to

any such ploys, including fear of a possible invasion by England and the desire for clarity on the future of the countries alliance. She felt justified in what other considered an act of betrayal to Ireland because she interpreted her role as an intermediate rather than a spy (Jordan 64). However, her work in intelligence shows the constant division between her Irish and English identity and her internal conflict with the idea of nationalism and loyalism.

This conflict is a prevalent theme in many of her short stories, but “The Happy Autumn Fields” in particular is almost perfectly parallel to Bowen’s own biography. The setting of the story alternates between two very different locations: Victorian County Cork and WWII England. The difference in setting is a key plot device in the story, signifying shifts in personality from Mary to Sarah and vice versa. However, it is also a direct correlation to Bowen’s personal life. The Irish setting where Sarah lives, in which Mary want so desperately to be, is directly correlated to Bowen’s Court. Passed down from generation to generation, the property was a key location of Bowen’s childhood. As the only child, Bowen came into possession of the land after the death of her mother, when the property was already derelict and falling under disrepair. Because of her financial strains, Bowen was forced to sell the beloved property and building to a neighbor under the pretext of it being kept intact; however, within a year the house was torn down. Bowen had a deep love for the manor and the surrounding country, and the loss of Bowen’s Court was a large traumatic experience in her life.

Bowen using an Irish setting as a safe haven signifies her own idealized memories surrounding her time at Bowen’s Court. The Irish setting in the text is itself a representation of a desired dreamland that Mary manifests and attempts to hide within in a denial of her own reality. The idealized location represents everything that Mary is lacking in her life: stability, peace, and kinship. When she adopts Sarah’s persona, Mary is adopting Ireland as her home and therefore

homeland. Through this adoption, Mary finds a sense of place and self that she has been looking for, but in the end, she cannot stay in the dreamlike place and must return to reality. Mary's desire to continually return to Ireland but being forcefully pulled back is parallel to Bowen's own experiences. Bowen was unable to keep the Court in her possession, and with its destruction she also lost the physical ties she had to Ireland. She made nostalgic trips back to visit the property, sans mansion, but was unable to ever recover the property, forcing her to return to London.

On the other hand, the London location of the other half of the story aligns with the reality in which the majority of Bowen's childhood occurred. Bowen's recollection of her childhood shows the suffocating impact of World War 1: "We grew up under the intolerable obligation of being fought for and could not fall short in character without recollecting that men were dying for us" (Hoogland 8). The constant moral strain forced upon her formative years continued to strain her adult years, as she lived through yet another world war. The war that was so prevalent in Bowen's London is equally momentous in Mary's London. Both are controlled by destruction and decay, the complete opposite of the idealized Ireland. Part of Mary's motivation for her trance-like escape to Ireland is just that—an escape. She wants to leave the uncertainty and demolition of the world around her to be in a peaceful, idyllic place as the role of Sarah. When Mary is thrust back into her London life, she observes the house falling to pieces around her and "she rejoiced, if anything, in its decrepitude" (677). She celebrates the destruction of the London environment because it highlights the tranquility of her Irish mental-landscape.

The idea of land and ownership is also evident in the Irish setting of the story. Sarah claims that "the field and all these outlying fields in view... were Papa's" (671). His possession of the land is emphasized by the financial wellbeing of the family, who are all well-dressed,

well-educated, and have promised futures in education and marriage. The presence of sons as “heirs” to the estate is also important note, as Bowen’s own parents were dissatisfied with her gender and their lack of a valid heir (Jordan 49). Bowen’s personal desires for ownership and the dream of a flourishing Bowen’s Court which were never fulfilled in reality are impressed on her characters fictional reality in “The Happy Autumn Fields.”

Mary is in ownership of the London house, and has returned to find the family will and essentially clear out her belongings. Much like Bowen’s Court, Mary’s home is falling apart as a result of under the destruction of the war. In Sarah’s reality, the property follows the male bloodline for heirship; however, in this reality, Mary is the one who is the heir and therefore in charge and responsible for what happens to the property—this is more reflective of Bowens’ actual experience with Bowen’s Court. In this way, Mary’s reality is parallel to Bowens. Both women have a desire to reach the idealized Ireland, representing peace and escape, yet both women are incapable of being true citizens or having a lasting claim on the land. The trauma of losing Bowen’s Court and living through two different World Wars colors almost every one of Bowen’s short stories, but especially “The Happy Autumn Fields.” Just as Mary is unable to reconcile with her reality, Bowen was never able to overcome the lasting trauma of the war on her reality.

### **Roisin O’Donnell**

Roisin O’Donnell was born in England to Anglo-Irish parents who both came from different communities in Northern Ireland. O’Donnell spent her childhood in the United Kingdom, until she moved with her parents to Dublin when she was 18. She is currently based in County Meath and has spent her adult years in Ireland. As a result, she has a disjointed identity that is common in to the Anglo-Irish. She claims to feel “as much as a ‘foreigner’ as any

of [her] characters” and when questioned of her origins, she demonstrates a confusion rooted in the Irish-English divide (O’Donnell interview). Because of her Irish heritage and her technically English nationality, and the compounding time spent living in Ireland, O’Donnell says of herself that she has “the classic dilemma of being Irish in England, but English in Ireland” with the catch of “never quite fit[ting] into either world” (Interview).

This inability to find a “home” culture is evident in “Ebenezer’s Memories.” Catherine was born in and raised in Sheffield, England, but as a child spent summers and Christmases in Derry, Ireland, with her grandparents. Her mother was from Derry, but eloped with her English Catholic husband, Catherine’s father, to England in order to escape condemnation and the English-Irish tensions embodied in the Troubles. Because of their differing national origins, Catherine’s parents were judged for their “Mixed Marriage” which ultimately played a role in the death of Catherine’s father. During a visit to Derry for the first time in years, he went for a run through the city and was brutally beaten and murdered because of his English nationality.

Catherine is aware of the hostility towards her parents and towards herself because of their heritage, yet her recognition of the divide is skewed by her age. At the beginning of the story, Catherine is unsure why her family has to live in England, separate from her grandparents in Derry. She cannot firmly grasp the concept of the war that Derry is consumed by, yet she can see the influence of the violence. Catherine claims that Derry “retained its magical quality” due to the limited time spent there, but in her early descriptions of Derry, she uses language that doesn’t align with an ethereal beauty but rather describes a sense of wartime unease and unrest: “The city walls, intact and off-limits, knotted a noose around the town center... Derry was a secretive place, full of fenced off quarters” (O’Donnell 5). As Catherine ages, her grasp on the

reality of the political and religious tensions grows and her awareness of her own sense of unbelonging is solidified in her adulthood:

My copied accent had settled into a neutral lilt, and the confusion I'd felt as a child had only intensified. I'd moved to Dublin, but that hadn't solved anything. The older I'd become, the less Irish I felt, and also the less English, so that I now felt effectively stateless, lost between worlds. (O'Donnell 20)

She notes the rejection that she feels from both Ireland and England and the sense of being lost between two equally unwelcoming countries. This cultural dissonance exemplified in Catherine's childhood is a direct result of her Anglo-Irish origins, which is perhaps most clearly seen in her confusion as to how to react to the violence of The Troubles. Because of her unclear classification as neither Irish nor English, Catherine desires to sympathize with Ireland, and yet because of her English origins, the Irish refuse her sympathy and instead impress guilt upon her for her association with the English. As a result, Catherine finds herself jealous of her grandparents and the Irish as a whole for their ability to grieve the strife of the Troubles without condemnation or the need for justification.

### **Bernie McGill**

Bernie McGill was born in Lavey County in Northern Ireland and has spent her life in between Belfast and Portstewart, Northern Ireland. Subsequently, her perspective demonstrates her physically permanent environment without the confusion of an alternating homeland. While there is some anxiety in her work dealing with trauma in general and how it has lasting generational affects, McGill's writing doesn't exhibit the same cultural tensions as Bowen's or O'Donnell's. However, her writing does demonstrate the lasting effects of the Troubles on those on both sides of the conflict.

McGill's parent and grandparents on both sides of the family were also born in Northern Ireland. As a result, McGill doesn't exhibit the same tension of the Anglo-Irish identity that comes from a transition between two states, but rather "grew up with a kind of inherited nostalgia for a pre-partition Ireland" (McGill 2020). The border dividing the North from the Republic in the 1920's didn't displace her family, but rather altered the political environment in which they lived. According to McGill, all her characters come from this place; they carry the baggage of the lasting impact of the history of Northern Ireland, but it is never the central conflict in her stories (McGill 2020). Rather, her characters carry the weight of a generational trauma that influences their lifestyles and informs their decisions, even though they themselves have never been involved in the conflict of the Troubles directly.

In "Islander," the influence is subtle. The main character Sarah recall show she first met her boyfriend, Charlie. She and her classmate plan to take a trip celebrating their graduation, backpacking across France and Italy. The trip serves as a cleanse: leaving behind the stress of school and life and getting away from anything relevant to their confining Irish roots. Sarah, however, wants to make their first stop on Rathlin Island as "an iconic farewell to childhood summers" (McGill 68). This is where she meets Charlie, on the island that gives "the sense of being cut off and being released at the same time" (McGill 68). Although they end up dating, Sarah never planned on dating a fellow Irishman, but instead wanted to "end up with a Corsican or a Sicilian" (McGill 68). There is a continuous sense of dishonesty, as Sarah claims to want to avoid her Irish origins as much as possible, while taking every opportunity to turn back to them. In this treatment we see her inner turmoil; she wants the freedom to travel and explore but will never be able to fully forfeit her ties to her homeland.

## **Conclusion**

Each of these female authors ties a part of herself into her short story. This is not necessarily unique; in fact, biographically informed writing is as generic as the common cold. But what these women do that differs from their predecessors is shift the way the theme of memory influences trauma and any resulting catharsis. Their female protagonists endure trauma, and either face it head on or run away from it, such as Mary in “The Happy Autumn Fields.” The difference in how these characters face this decision of either processing or denial is informed by the cultural and political standards imposed on their authors.

If we view these stories as narrative psychotherapy, not just for the characters but for the authors themselves, it is easy to see how the shift in genre has occurred. The idea of memory has long been a staple in Irish literature, and the multigenerational trauma of the Anglo-Irish identity in addition to the Troubles has a formative place in the literature as well. The change in social acceptance and recognition of the trauma caused by the political dissonance that is now an inherent part of Irish identity has allowed more contemporary authors to freely explore themes previously unrecognized or not fully fleshed out.

There is a significant shift in how this theme of memory is being utilized and it has yet to be discussed in critical literature. The short stories that are focused on in this analysis are all by women and have female protagonists; both the authors and the characters of the book explore different forms of trauma throughout the stories. Not only does the genre allow for more wholesome representation of women and the popular issues that they face, but it has also seen an increase demand and popularity that warrants critical attention. The themes of memory and multigenerational trauma allow for women, real and fictional, to discuss and digest problems at both a personal and societal level.

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