

**Extracts from:**      **Irish Cultural Representations of Single Mothers  
and Their Children, 1890-1960**

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## Summary

The cultural record of the lives of Irish single mothers and their children is surprisingly rich, though there is little direct reference to the Mother and Baby Homes. Literary sources actively contest the official denial of the existence of pregnancy outside marriage in Ireland and frequently criticise dominant social attitudes. Folkloric sources tend to exhibit a greater degree of ambivalence than the official version of Irish culture.

- The most complex and detailed depictions of the dilemmas facing single mothers and their children in Irish society are found in fiction. There is a sustained effort by women writers beginning in the early 1940s to change social attitudes, employing popular genres, gothic, satire, pathos and humour. Despite avoidance of direct criticism of church institutions in most cases, the majority were censored and unavailable in the Republic of Ireland. Key writers for this period are Maura Laverty, Mary Lavin, Mary Beckett and Una Troy.
- There are direct references to pregnant women being sent to 'the Home' in fiction from the 1940s and 1950s, but the writers do not appear to have had any direct information about the *experience* of Mother and Baby Homes or Magdalene Laundries for the women and children themselves.
- There appears to have been a degree of self censorship in relation to this topic in Irish drama, exemplified by the history of TC Murray's *The Briery Path*.
- Fiction and drama in general promoted the acceptance of single mothers and their children into their own extended families and communities. The references to the banishment of this group to 'homes' and 'convents' by their families or communities in fiction and drama from the 1940s onwards are overwhelmingly negative. The texts indicate that the long term effects of these institutions, especially on children, were beginning to be understood from at least the early 1940s. Mary Beckett is particularly significant in this regard.
- In general the folk song tradition retained a focus on the unjust plight of young women who found themselves pregnant by men who had seduced and abandoned them. Ballads which dealt with this topic remained popular throughout the twentieth century.

## Chapter 1

### Contexts: Religion, Censorship and the Cult of Purity

The last fifty years has seen enormous change in attitudes in Ireland, to the extent that the views expressed even two generations ago can seem profoundly alien to us in the twenty first century. This is not just the case in relation to attitudes to single mothers or sexuality, but also in relation to the rights of children, the way in which childhood itself was understood, and the very different value put on the bonding process between mothers and babies if they were not part of a legally sanctioned family. Central to understanding these very different attitudes is an analysis of the framing of all official discourse around sexuality, childbirth and child rearing within a rigid religious context on the one hand and the intensity with which the state sought to control almost all forms of cultural expression on the other.

### Purity, Piety and Patriotism

It is not possible to disentangle religion and politics as *cultural* determinants of the ideology of sexual purity in the post-independence Irish state. At the zenith of Catholic influence in the southern Irish state, Pope Pius XI's address to the Eucharistic Congress of 1932 spoke of the 'The Virgin Mary, Queen of Ireland.' The reference would have been immediately recognisable to devout Irish Catholics as an acknowledgement of the ascendancy of Catholic doctrine and idolisation of 'purity' in Irish social and sexual mores. Single mothers and their children were not represented in the official discourse of Irish Catholic nationalism: that ideology insisted that they simply could not exist.

While the prevailing attitudes of the period 1922-1960 seem alien and sometimes comical now, this was a system of belief which had very real and tragic consequences for young unmarried women who became pregnant and for their children. The existence of Irish children outside the institution of marriage was treated as simply unthinkable. Parallel to the national investment in sexual abstinence and the institution of marriage, respectability became a closely guarded commodity at local and familial level. The economic status and viability of a family could be seriously undermined by loss of this commodity. In an example from Northern Ireland, Sara in Sam Hanna Bell's 1951 novel, *December Bride*, eventually marries because her daughter 'must have a name' in order to marry and form her own family (the novel was inevitably banned in the Republic). While the religious context is different

(Bell's characters come from the Presbyterian community), the connection between land, family and respectability in a community of small farmers is not. There is a very pronounced class aspect to this, as is also apparent in MacNamara, Lavin, Beckett and Laverty's fiction discussed below. Civil suits taken for redress in cases of 'seduction' and reported in local newspapers specifically sought to put an economic value on this loss of reputation as well as the loss of earnings where the 'seduced' women had worked or assisted in the work of the family farm and business. As historian Maria Luddy has chronicled, the newspaper reports of these cases were paradoxically the most widely circulated representation of the experiences of single mothers and their children, a singular breach in the wall of silence. The level of payments made were too small to serve as a proxy for child support. Instead an eighteenth century legal definition of seduction as a form of theft from the family of the young woman who became pregnant enabled compensation to be sought by her family. This included loss of earnings for the family if pregnancy meant that their daughter could not work, either in paid employment, at home or on the family farm, for the duration of the pregnancy. This did not apply to the more prosperous families, however, and the reparation sought was one for loss of reputation. It seems likely that some cases were taken as a counter to the stories being told about the woman by the father of her child to justify his refusal to marry her.

### **Censorship and Silencing**

The deliberations of the first Irish film censor give a fascinating insight into the evolution of a bureaucracy to impose a culture of silence around childbirth and sexuality in general and 'illegitimacy' in particular. As early as 1923, D.W. Griffith's *The White Rose* was rejected by the film censor, James Montgomery, on the basis that it was 'a story of seduction wrapped up in unhealthy sentimental twaddle' (31/07/1924). References to illegitimacy and birth control feature prominently in Montgomery's notes justifying cuts and rejections of films. *Blossoms in the Dust*, a biopic of Edna Gladney, the American campaigner for the removal of the word 'illegitimate' from Texas birth certificates, lost much of its force for Irish audiences when Montgomery insisted on cutting out her passionate, if not exactly liberal declaration: 'there are no illegitimate children. There are only illegitimate parents' (14/11/1941).

While the views of the Official Film Censor's office must be understood as an extremely narrow version of Irish cultural attitudes, it is important to note that it was the *official* version of those attitudes and perceived itself to have public as well as clerical support. As such it was a powerful indicator of a state which considered it both distasteful and un-Irish to discuss sexuality or even childbirth. Montgomery considered even a scene in 'a taxi on [the] way to lying-in hospital' as is 'too intimate for general exhibition' in Ireland (30/9/1936).

Parallel to the development of state control over cinema, the Censorship of Publications Act (1929) created a censorship board which sought to control the sale and distribution of literature via a notoriously broad definition of obscenity. This censorship was routinely evaded by those with the resources to do so, but it impacted heavily on those depending on library borrowing. Censorship of publications was closely linked to the control of population, especially the suppression of individual control over reproduction.

Any representation of the reality of sexual and reproductive life was understood as a foreign assault on pure, devout Ireland and the *Register of Prohibited Books* became, as one wit put it, the Everyman's Guide to the Modern Classics. The Department of Justice admitted in a memo in 1966 that the board was particularly prone to ban Irish writers and the next chapter demonstrates how fiction that dealt directly with the experience of single women and their children fared under this regime.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Cultural Representation of Single Mothers and Their Children**

Fiction: Seduction, Cruelty and Survival

#### **New Women, Naturalism and Modernism, 1894-1922**

The 'New Woman' fiction of the late nineteenth century, while often focussed on questions of education, employment and equality in marriage, also began to open up discussion of women's sexuality and pregnancy outside marriage. George Egerton (Mary Chavelita Dunne), disowned by her own family for her affair with an older married man, forged an international literary career in the spaces between the emergence of the 'New Woman' and the development of modernism. Her stories deal with domestic abuse, abortion and prostitution as well as the active

choice of single motherhood. The fiction of this period can seem much more contemporary in its attitude to gender and sexuality than material from the mid-twentieth century. Unusually among the Irish writers who wrote on the subject, Egerton was herself a single mother.

The best known Irish nineteenth century novel about the travails of a single mother and her child is George Moore's *Esther Waters*. Moore wrote in a self consciously naturalistic style about the life of a young servant girl, seduced by a fellow servant, who abandoned her when he had a chance to elope with a wealthier woman. The novel is scrupulous in its attention to the economic dimension to Esther's plight and the cruel dilemmas presented to an unmarried working woman who chooses to keep her child. Dismissed from her position when she can no longer hide her pregnancy, the only work Esther can get is as a wet nurse to a wealthy woman's child. To feed this child, she has to commit her own baby to the tender mercies of a local baby farm. It seems unthinkable to us now, but the insistence of Esther's employer that she cannot keep and feed her own baby due to a fear of infection was not uncommon in the period. Realising quite quickly that her baby has little chance of surviving this arrangement, Esther has no option but to seek admission to the local workhouse. This being a novel, despite Moore's intense realism, she finds alternative childminding and employment prospects at the last minute. Thereafter she moves from job to job, frequently almost worked to death or dismissed from her post when the existence of her son becomes known to her employers. Disastrously, Esther eventually marries her initial seducer, giving up the alternative marriage she had desired in an attempt to rescue her son from the stigma of 'illegitimacy' and to secure his future.

The novel which would become a by-word for the attitudes of small town twentieth century Ireland was published before the establishment of the Irish state. Brinsley Macnamara's 1918 novel, *The Valley of the Squinting Windows*, tells the sorry tale of the destruction of two generations by the stigma of illegitimacy, situating the problem very much within an analysis of the class micro-distinctions of small town Ireland. Macnamara's bleak novel tells the story of Nan Brennan, who having aspired to marriage with a comparatively wealthy farmer falls pregnant by him and is then subject to a quite deliberate effort on his part to ruin her reputation: 'Nan thought of how Henry Shanahan had failed to marry her after he had ruined her; of how the disgrace had done no harm at all to him with his money and his fine farm.

Then there was the burning thought of how he had married Grace Gogarty, the proudest and grandest girl in the whole parish.' Nan has assumed that their child died, but it transpires that he has been secretly adopted by his father to replace the 'legitimate' stillborn baby he has had with his new wife: 'It seemed less of a crime that the little innocent babe should have been murdered in this house and buried in the garden than that her old, dead mother should have sold it to Henry Shannon. And how was she to know?'

Nan initially emigrates in the novel, returning to inherit her parents' house and land with a new husband and son in tow. Unlike her first lover, however, she is never allowed to forget her past and her marriage is destroyed by gossip as soon as she returns home. A bitter woman, Nan is as judgemental of others as they have been of her. Her one consolation is her son's aspiration to be a priest, a possibility which makes her the source of much local jealousy and the target of threats to reveal her past to her son. The rural community portrayed by Macnamara is vicious in the extreme. The priest effectively acts as an enforcer of a moral code which protects the interests of the more prosperous members of his flock and enables sexual exploitation. Nan's second son, John, forgets his clerical ambitions when he falls in love with the local schoolteacher, Rebecca, who is in her turn seduced and abandoned by his half-brother. The tragic inevitability of the denouement is very much influenced by the ideas of Ibsen, but with sharp, detailed local elements. Rebecca is pressured by the priest who forces her to leave the town (and her job) to hire a car (which she can't afford) to the station. For this she is charged the extortionate sum of £1 from the meagre £5 that is all she possesses, a gift from the local schoolteacher, the only sympathetic character in the novel. It is not coincidental that Macnamara's father was himself a teacher in an Irish village, the inhabitants of which recognised too much of their locale in *The Valley of the Squinting Windows*. Vindicating Macnamara's pessimism, they retaliated by throwing stones through the windows of his father's schoolhouse and burning copies of his novel. Quite apart from the power of its naturalist prose, the novel is striking for several reasons. It represents pregnancy outside marriage as a recurrent feature of Irish village life, a high degree of ambivalence if not acceptance of infanticide as a way of dealing with the problem, the connivance of the church in secret adoptions and the crucial role of class in determining how both mothers and babies were treated in these circumstances.

### **Breaking the Silence: Women's Fiction, 1940-60**

The exposure of the economic injustice which compounded the sexual double standard in Moore and Macnamara's representations of single mothers remains a key concern of later twentieth century realist approaches to the same subject. Mary Lavin's story, 'Sarah', which appeared in *Tales from Bective Bridge* in 1943, is very much in this tradition. It is brutally clear about the factors which propel Sarah from relative social acceptance as a mother of three sons outside wedlock to death in a ditch giving birth to her fourth child. When the story opens, she 'has a bit of a bad name', but is regarded as 'unfortunate, that's all'. A 'great worker, strong and tireless', Sarah works as a cleaner for many of the local women while also keeping house for her two 'rough' brothers and three children. Her brothers' habitual tolerance of their sister's situation is motivated by self interest: "The priest said a Home was the only place for the likes of her. I said we would have no part in putting her away - God Almighty, what would we do without her? There must be a woman in the house." The spectre of clerical interference and incarceration hovers over Sarah as her brothers contemplate her fourth pregnancy, taking into account the possibility that her existing sons can soon be 'put out to service'. The rural Ireland portrayed in this story is a place with no glimmer of affection or hope. Despite their pity for the 'unfortunate' Sarah, married local women are careful to keep her away from their husbands and warn newcomer Kathleen Kedrigan to avoid her. As a demonstration of her superior faith in her own husband, 'goaded on by her legitimate power over her man', Kathleen hires Sarah to keep house when she has to attend a clinic in Dublin. The story is characteristic of Lavin's externalisation technique, but also enigmatic to avoid censorship. We never know what motivates Sarah or how willing a partner she is in the sexual encounter which leaves her pregnant with Oliver Kedrigan's child. This time Sarah does not submit in silence as she has previously done. She writes to Kathleen, identifying Oliver as the father of her child, with disastrous consequences. Kathleen informs Sarah's brothers, who react violently, throwing the heavily pregnant Sarah out of the house on a terrible night. The eldest brother, Pat, comments that he wasn't going to stand for her: 'Carrying on with a married man! No one is going to say I put up with that kind of thing. It was different the other times when it was probably old Molloy or his like that would have been prepared to pay for his mistakes if the need arose.' Pat's diatribe indicates that social standing and economic advantage, not kinship, are his overwhelming concerns and the key motives underpinning this society. Sarah is left to give birth alone in a ditch and to die

in appalling conditions with her newborn child.

In contrast to the bleak picture of Irish society presented by Macnamara and Lavin, Maura Laverty's 1942 novel *Never No More* is a warm, nostalgic portrait of a young girl, Delia, growing up in the nineteen twenties in the home of her beloved Gran in the little village of Ballyderrig. While the novel is full of lyrical affection for the place, the villagers and their way of life, it includes several stories of the difficulties facing single women and their children. Pregnancy outside marriage is not presented as a rare or tragic occurrence, but part of the normal life of the people, with which families and individuals come to terms and from which they move on to ordinary lives. Ballyderrig is home to another unfortunate Sarah, a young woman who supplements her income from doing 'heavy washing' and casual labour by 'one of the oldest professions in the world'. The narrator notes that 'Ballyderrig's attitude to Sarah was surprising', but the women of the village stop and chat when they meet her and regularly employ her: 'Even those who turned with horrified loathing from any young girl who anticipated her marriage by a few months, never shunned Sarah'. Sarah's eldest child does die in the course of the novel, but the emphasis is on the kindness and support of the community, led by Gran, for both mother and daughter. In an enthusiastic and very shrewd introduction to the 1984 Virago edition of *Never No More*, Maeve Binchy noted the element of wish fulfilment fantasy in the novel, which differed significantly from Laverty's own childhood experience, though she presented it as autobiographical fiction.

The story of another single mother, Bids Smullen, gives a fascinating insight into the social role of the IRA's district tribunals during the War of Independence. These tribunals, unlike the formal courts that came later, actively pursued the fathers of children conceived outside wedlock, though their solution, according to the novel, was the imposition of forced marriages, not maintenance payments. In Bids case a member of the tribunal which has already forced her errant lover to flee the country for theft eventually marries the girl himself. Interestingly, in this case the fate of the child is not explicit, though an adoption by her married sister is implied: 'Bids Smullen went to stay with her married sister in Portarlinton. She returned to us six months later, shyer and quieter in her manner, but otherwise unchanged'.

A positive resolution is even offered to one of the most startling and disturbing

episodes in the novel, which deals with child abuse: 'all Ballyderrig was horrified to hear that fourteen year old Nellie Mack, of the plaits and white pinafore, was going to have a baby. The horror was changed to fury when it was learned that the father was old Mr Graham. And all that terrified Nellie could sob when questioned was, 'He promised me a bicycle. He promised me a bicycle!'. Her rapist escapes the lynching threatened by the men of Ballyderrig by collapsing into insanity and ending his days in the asylum in Carlow. The novel is scathing about the 'diabolical cruelty' of her aunt who blames Nellie and it is implied that the beating she gives the girl contributes to the baby being stillborn. 'Soon after that, Nellie Mack was sent away to some convent for fallen women in Dublin'. This is one of very few direct references to Magdalene laundries in Irish literature prior to the nineteen nineties and it is significant that this is the outcome for the youngest, most powerless and abused single mother in the novel.

Mary Beckett's short story, 'Theresa', appeared in the liberal modernising magazine, *The Bell*, in 1951. 'Theresa' tells the story of a young woman who enjoys a wartime romance with an American soldier stationed in Northern Ireland. Beckett wrote primarily of Catholic nationalist Belfast life, so there are significant areas of overlap with Lavin, Lavery and Troy, but the historical and political contexts of her characters are different. When Theresa discovers she is pregnant, she is exasperated with her mother's reaction: 'Oh, don't go on like that. I'll have the baby in the hospital and then I'll leave it in the home and then I'll be back at work the same as I always was'. We later find out that work is a key concern here. Theresa's mother has worked cleaning houses and struggled to raise her family while her husband was long term unemployed before the war. Theresa finds that when the baby is born her feelings towards her child are very different, though they are complicated. She is puzzled to find that her daughter is black: she has not perceived her soldier lover to be black at all. The story presents Theresa as very naive, well intentioned and frightened. The protectiveness she feels towards her baby is exacerbated by anxiety about how the little girl will be treated: 'how could she keep the child safe from people who would jeer at her for being a n\_\_\_\_\_?' She calls the baby Deirdre after the nurse who delivered her, but the name invokes the legendary Deirdre, the most beautiful and most sorrowful of women in Irish legend. Trying to make plans to combine work with looking after the baby, Theresa thinks: 'she would have to be watching her all the time for fear anyone would harm the child.' When Theresa's own mother initially recoils and tells her she can't bring Deirdre home, Theresa tries to persuade her that the nuns won't take a black baby.

The grandmother quickly relents, but Theresa is so frightened by the initial hatred and rejection of Deirdre that she decides her baby 'would be safer in the Home'.

A puzzling episode brings this anguish to an end. The new parish priest makes an appeal from the altar for the 'girls from this parish' who had babies during the war to retrieve these children from the local orphanage where, no matter how well the nuns are caring for them, they lack a mother's love. There is nothing like this represented anywhere else in the literature. Beckett may be trying, like Laverty and Troy, to conjure up a more compassionate form of Catholicism in her fiction and assert that religion and single parenting are not incompatible. This kind of reforming project in fiction is very much in keeping with the ethos of *The Bell*. The story, like Maura Laverty's *Never No More*, represents single motherhood as a relatively common occurrence. Theresa's difficulties derive primarily from her fear of racism rather than her fear of scandal and gossip, though the economic challenges of raising a child on her own push her into a marriage for which she has little enthusiasm.

Mary Beckett's stories from the nineteen forties and fifties anticipate issues which were to later become key topics of public debate. 'Ruth' was published in the first issue of the highly influential Belfast journal, *Threshold*, in 1957. Once again, Beckett sets the story of pregnancy outside marriage within an intergenerational and communal context, tracking the consequences through the generations and across family relationships. The twenty year old Ruth has already run away from her grandmother's house when the story begins and the tale is told from the perspective of two gossiping neighbours and Ruth's grandmother, Mrs McGreevy, who pours out her grief and guilt to them. Ruth is the daughter of a young intellectually disabled girl who became pregnant, died in childbirth and whose family put the baby in an orphanage and denied her existence for eleven years. Mrs McGreevy eventually has a change of heart and brings Ruth to live with them, but the family does not recover from the double shame in their society of having a daughter who is intellectually disabled and a granddaughter who is illegitimate. 'Wee cold Ruth' has never recovered from the time in the orphanage, unable to do more than stiffly shake her grandmother's hand when she arrives: 'she's poor ... and empty and how is she to know what is love or friendship'. Mrs McGreevy laments her own lack of demonstrative affection for the child, who 'gave no trouble ... but she gave no happiness either and I don't think she got any herself from us'. It is tempting to regard the story as a precursor to the

nineteen sixties and a reflection on the consequences and legacies of Irish attitudes which continued to have repercussions but which were beginning to be challenged.

Una Troy (who also wrote as Elizabeth Connor) published *We Are Seven in* 1955 with William Heinemann Ltd (proudly boasting its operations in London, Melbourne and Toronto on the novel's title page). The blurb neatly and humorously sets out its challenge to any preconceptions of Irish rural life. 'In the townland of Doon in County Waterford live the Monaghans, a source of delight to themselves, but a blot in the eyes of the sterner inhabitants of the parish. Bridget Monaghan is the proud mother of seven, but the various men who should be filling the role of proud fathers are instead skulking nervously in the background, and even join forces in a plan to resettle the Monaghans. But they reckon without Mary, Tommy, Willie and Sissy (the twins), Pansy, Toughy and Pius - seven characters in search of a father!' This humorous tone is maintained throughout, though the novel hints at darker realities. The daughter Mary knows, however, that 'they were despised for what in others might have been admired, but in the Monaghans was adding insult to injury' in the view of their neighbours. When the twins sit a scholarship exam to attend secondary school it left: 'even the best- intentioned neighbours bereft of Christian charity ... There was a universal, but faint, hope that they might fail'. When they succeed: 'The injustice of the world was recognised anew. Better children than these - children whose right to exist was indisputable - must be content with the schooling the State gave them up to fourteen'. Similarly 'when it became known that Tommy Monaghan was dying from peritonitis after an operation, everyone was very sorry ... But it was considered quite time for God to have visited Bridget Monaghan with some trouble that wasn't of her own making'. Tommy survives, partly due to his previously miserly father paying for an expensive nursing home. There is a fairytale quality to the eventual good fortune of all the children, but the novel mentions that Mary, the eldest of Bridget's children, did not even sit the scholarship exam as she was too involved in bringing up her younger siblings. Bridget is a good provider for her household, but not necessarily a good mother to her children in the traditional sense.

Under the pretext of concern for 'the poor children', the deplorable Mrs Bates involves the local sergeant, pointing out that, 'Children that aren't properly cared for

are taken and sent to Industrial Schools. Children under fourteen. Bridget Monaghan mightn't wish to stay here if her children were taken from her. This is one of a series of events in the novel which raise the possibility that the Monaghans could fall victim to one of the tragic fates which nineteenth century Ireland in reality so often visited upon single mothers and their children. In each case this fate is averted and the story transforms tragedy to comedy: 'It was unfortunate for those most deeply interested in the Monaghan case that their District Justice should be a man whose sense of humour approximated to the authentic and rather broad type of Gaelic culture so much deplored and condemned by the decent, modern Gael'. The Justice, justifying his title, and the Sergeant, representing the State, reflect on the case which concludes with the former sending the children home. The judge is quite clear that Bridget has been unjustly treated. He 'objected to the attempt to make him a tool to eradicate the consequences of erring respectability. "They're nice children," he said. "They're all right," said the Sergeant. "The only thing anyone has against them is that they shouldn't be there at all."

The story of Bridget Monaghan and her children is based on the real life case of Mary McCarthy, a single mother of seven who lived in Marlhill, County Tipperary. She was subjected to an arson attack in an attempt to get her to leave the area in 1926 and eventually murdered in 1940, possibly to avoid her naming the father of her seventh child, who died in infancy. Troy's father, Sean, was the local district justice who rejected applications to send Mary's children into institutions on two separate occasions. Mary McCarthy's story is now most often remembered for the miscarriage of justice which saw an innocent local man, Harry Gleeson, hanged for her murder.

Both Laverty and Troy had significant success outside Ireland which might have exacerbated the censor's antipathy to their work. Both portrayed single mothers and their children as part of rural Irish society, vulnerable and subjected to prejudice, but surviving and in most cases capable of making decent lives for themselves against the odds. This seemed to be much more offensive to the sensibility embodied in the censorship process than the representations of pregnancy outside marriage as a catastrophic exception leading inevitably to misery, ruin and death which is evident in *Lavin*. A key factor in slipping stories of single motherhood through the censor's net appears to have been conformity to the

paradigm of death and destruction as the inevitable outcome of pregnancy outside marriage. This factor may explain why *Never No More*, full of affection and nostalgia for the rural Ireland which the state purported to cherish, was banned, while 'Sarah', a bleak portrayal of a rural Ireland populated by the vindictive and miserly, was not censored. Representing single mothers and their children as simply part of Irish life, with aspirations and the possibility of viable lives outside the strictures of secrecy and separation in adoption or institutionalisation, was intrinsically subversive.

### **Drama**

Irish theatres enjoyed an anomalous position, which is illuminating in relation to the class bias of censorship. The theatre was not subject to official censorship, though it did periodically attract expressions of disapproval from church, state and public that included subtle pressure, bad reviews, letters to the paper, riots and demonstrations. In January 1914, TC Murray read excerpts from his tragic drama, *The Briery Path*, to the National Literary Society in Dublin. The play dealt with the subject of a young, unmarried, pregnant woman, driven to suicide by denunciation from the altar and abandonment by her lover. Murray was a school teacher in a rural community at the time, a married man with five children, and his terror of his clerical manager was such that he pretended he was reading someone else's play. The play finally reached the Abbey in 1948, when it was staged by Ria Mooney's Experimental Theatre Initiative. The review in the *Irish Times* failed to mention the subject matter of the play. The strange history of *The Briery Path*, which would be re-invented as an attack on the prohibition on contraception in another 'experimental' initiative in 1973, indicates how much self-censorship and self-protection was involved in the choice of topics in the apparently unregulated theatres and explains why so few plays dealt with the topic prior to 1960. *The Briery Path* is only a moderately well written play, but the Abbey's experimental wing kept returning to it when it sought to break the taboos on single motherhood.

During the 1950s, a battle was going on for control of Irish culture, with Archbishop McQuaid initially gaining control of the Censorship of Publications Board via the Knights of Columbanus. It was still a long time before the existence of single mothers and their children was fully acknowledged by the Irish state and an uncontroversial topic in Irish culture. Drama would be a significant factor in that process. Mairead Ni Ghrada's *An Trial!* (1964) was revolutionary in its attempt to

deal directly with the experience of a 'Home', the 'House of Refuge', which is obviously based on a Magdalene Laundry. Like some of the earlier writers discussed here, Ni Ghrada was careful to avoid a direct attack on the role of the Catholic Church, though those on trial in the play for their part in the tragedy of Maire and her child's deaths represent almost every other aspect of Irish society. Premiered in the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1964, it was a mature work from a writer, broadcaster and language activist who was a veteran of Cumann na mBan and was imprisoned for her activities during the War of Independence. Ni Ghrada was very close to the heart of the Irish state and a significant contributor to RTE. She was also, by 1964, extremely disillusioned with the treatment of single mothers and with the sexual double standard that applied in rural Ireland. Ni Ghrada begins and ends the original Irish language version of the play with the song *Siuil a Ghra*, a folk song featuring the seduction and betrayal of a young woman. In doing so she situates Maire's story firmly within Irish tradition. Writing in the Irish language, she had resources within the folk tradition to draw upon, but also a degree of protection from the accusation of being anti-Irish in depicting a situation which was so regularly denounced as intrinsically un-Irish. Maire's exploitation by a married teacher, her family's rejection, her incarceration in the House of Refuge, her inability to find work are all chronicled and Irish society is held responsible when she kills her child and herself. Even in death Maire and her child are ostracised:

Nach uaigneach an tsochraid a bhí aici.

An Bheirt acu in aon chónra!

Ba bhrónach an radharc é!

Go bhfóire Dia ar an gcréatúr.

Trócaire go raibh ar a hanam.

The English language version reads:

'Tis a lonely life she had, a lonely funeral after she was dead

'Twas a sad funeral, the two of them in the one coffin.

The two of them going out of life together without plume or a hearse or anything.

In many respects, *An Trial!* expands the story told over 20 years earlier in Mary Lavin's 'Sarah'. Both draw on the folkloric tradition of songs and stories of doomed single mothers and their children.

### **The Folk Tradition: Song, Tale and Memoir**

Songs dealing with the tragic fate of single mothers were highlights of the repertoire of two of the most influential women folk singers of the twentieth century, Elizabeth (Bess) Cronin and Sarah Makem. Cronin's revered rendition of 'Lord Gregory' (a version of 'The Lass of Aughrim') creates a link back to the use of the song in the "Dead", a short story by James Joyce, which indicates that the experience of single pregnant women was a central part of the folk culture which Joyce and Irish modernism so ambivalently drew on. Cronin's repertoire and rendition of folk songs had a substantial influence on the folk revival of the 1960s and 1970s. Folk songs and folklore function on one level to re-enforce social norms, on another level to vent frustration at those norms. Cronin's version of 'Lord Gregory' has a complex moral framework. On the one hand, the 'lass' who sings of her troubles has no prospect other than a lonely death along with her child after her seduction and abandonment. The cause of her 'downfall' is identified with the gentry class and by extension the English invaders. In an interesting reversal of the usual gender roles, dangerous sexuality is identified with both masculinity and foreignness. The class disparity between the protagonists is also a very significant part of the tragedy.

In contrast, the protagonists of 'The Butcher Boy', from Sarah Makem's repertoire, are both young people of humble origin. The song was hugely popular into the late twentieth century and appropriated as the title of Patrick MacCabe's 1992 novel and Neil Jordan's renowned film adaptation of that novel in 1997. The transmission of Sarah's repertoire through her son, Tommy Makem, a key figure in the folk revival, undoubtedly contributed to its prevalence in the folk song and ballad repertoire of the late twentieth century. The song's repetition of the key cultural trope of pregnancy outside marriage as a catastrophe which can only be remedied by death undoubtedly contributed also. The young woman in the song wishes 'in vain' that she was a maid again. This being impossible, she moves on to 'wish my baby it was born/ And smiling on its daddy's knee/ And me poor girl to be dead and gone/with the long green grass growing over me'. The song shifts into the third person when she is found hanging with a note pleading:

Oh, make my grave large, wide and deep  
Put a marble stone at my head and feet  
And in the middle, a turtle dove  
That the world may know, that I died for love.

Sean O'Críomhthainn's account of the lives and culture of the former Basket Islanders who moved to the mainland adopts a tolerant and even comic tone about pregnancy outside marriage. *Lá Dár Saol* presents rural, Irish speaking society as much more tolerant than the mainstream of Irish society in 1969. The memoir tells the story of the successful efforts of a local mother to overcome the objections of his mother to the father of her daughter's child marrying the girl. The dominant forces in the story are the two mothers. It is the mother of the girl who eventually prevails:

“Féach ní héinne atá marbh. Nach teaspach an cúram go léir, agus aon tigh go bhfuil bean óg agus clann óg tagtha isteach ann, dar ndóigh, ní fhéadfadh san a bheith amhlaidh gan rath Dé a bheith ar an dtigh sin.”

The English language version,

"Look, it isn't dead anyone is. Wasn't it only heat of the blood was the cause of all, and if a young woman and her child move into any house sure it couldn't happen unless God's blessing was on that house?"

The upshot of all the commotion is that the priest is sent for: 'They made a great wedding day of it in Buailtin'. This perception of the young woman and her child as a sign of God's blessing is very much at odds with the dominant representations of Irish traditional beliefs around this issue, but it is worth remembering that Sean O'Críomhthainn was much closer to that tradition than many of those who wrote about it. He was also writing at the end of the 1960s, when cultural change was very much in the air and his account was unlikely to be considered scandalous.

There is further evidence that a greater degree of ambivalence is evident in the Irish folk tradition than in the attitudes of Church and State. Anne O'Connor notes the very different inflections of the moral status of the single mother in the dark legend of 'Petticoat Loose', with its intimations of monstrous sexuality, on the one hand and the folktale referred to as the Mary Magdalene story on the other. The latter, collected by Sean O'Dughda in 1958, condemns the judgemental attitude of a priest who refuses the last rites to a single mother and is forced to do penance for his severity. It is worth noting that the central role of the 'Schools' Project in collecting Irish folklore in the 1930s intrinsically limited the types of material collected to that which parents and grandparents

considered suitable for children's ears. Consequently and not accidentally, the folklore record for beliefs in relations to pregnancy, childbirth and sexuality are scarce. There are references which give credence to Macnamara's description of communal complicity in or ambiguity around the infanticide of newborn infants of unmarried women. 'They say that Moll Garvaun used to sleep with her eyes opened. That only happens to women who kill their child, a *garlach* [illegitimate child], you know,' recounted a school child in Croom in the nineteen thirties. Daithi O'Ceanntabhair, the teacher who collected the Croom reports, seems to have been open to recording lore around 'illegitimate' children. A longer story points towards a high degree of communal ambivalence towards infanticide in such cases, complicated by a desire to avoid any entanglements with the law:

I'm telling you nothing but what's the truth, I have it from old Paddy. He said there did a woman live at Boherabassy and she did away with her (illegitimate) child. She buried the child under a shallow sod on Ardthreeveesa.

Old Paddy was going to work to Croker's (In Fort Elizabeth, properly Garrane, Manister Parish) and he found the fresh red sod. He turned it with his spade and found the dead child under it. He covered it up and left it so, for he didn't want to have to be giving evidence, and he said let somebody else do that.

He knew who owned the child (i.e. who was its mother) and he didn't want to get her into any more trouble than she was in, and so he held his tongue. I often heard him say that he saw that woman afterwards doing public penance in a big white sheet, behind here in Croom".

These stories may explain the association of 'illegitimate' children with the uncanny and supernatural in some of the *piseogs* and stories, such as the Hungry Sod/*Fod Ghorta*, the spot where an illegitimate unbaptised child was buried secretly: 'If a person happens to stand on this sod he is seized with hunger and weakness.'

### **Conclusion: Legacies**

There is a considerable difference between the cultural representation of single mothers and their children and the historical realities of their experience in the twentieth century. This is not a uniquely Irish difference, but it was compounded in the Irish case by a particularly rigid regime of censorship in relation to fiction and film. This regime of silence entrenched attitudes, making single motherhood

appear much more aberrant and unusual than was the case.

Culture is profoundly shaped by what is unsayable within it. There were brave voices who challenged the regime of silence around single mothers and their children. There were far more examples of covert engagement with these issues, through displacement onto other places and times, from folk songs to ghost stories. Above all though, the mainstream of Irish culture was deformed by its refusal to talk about what happened to its most vulnerable citizens. The refusal to accept that Ireland was just an ordinary country of ordinary human beings, neither especially pure nor especially sinful, contributed to punishing regimes around sexuality and fertility. Understanding the ways in which single mothers and their children were rendered outcast and invisible by official culture in Ireland is crucial to coming to terms with the legacy of that culture.

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