

HPEN702 BUILDING SMALL WORLDS: THE SHORT STORY IN ENGLISH



The Irish Short Story: from
Joyce to Donoghue

Giorgio de Chirico, *Melancholy and Mystery of a Street*, 1914

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Upon the successful completion of this module, the student should be able to:

- To examine the provenance & meaning of the short story in English;
- To understand the significance of **the short story as a vehicle of cultural expression in minority cultures within the UK** & former colonies;
- To explore the proliferation of short stories in translation;
- To demonstrate this understanding of meaning & technique in the translation of a short story from the students' home language(s) into English, or from close readings of translated short stories.

THE EUROPEAN LESSON

‘I think that out of the dreary sameness of existence, a measure of dramatic life may be drawn. Even the most commonplace, the dearest among the living, may play a part in a great drama. It is sinful foolishness to sigh back for the good old times, to feed the hunger of us with the cold stones they afford. Life we must accept as we see it before our eyes, men and women as we meet them in the real world, not as we apprehend them in the world of faery. The great human comedy in which each has share, gives limitless scope to the true artist, today as yesterday and as in years gone.’

Joyce reviewing Ibsen's new play *When We Dead Awaken*, in January 1900;
qtd Wallace Gray, ‘James Joyce's *Dubliners*: An Introduction

IRISH SHORT STORY

The Irish short story tradition has long been considered a predominantly realist one, with writers from George Moore and James Joyce over Frank O'Connor and Seán O'Faoláin to John McGahern and Claire Keegan offering largely mimetic portrayals of Irish life. As Heather Ingman has convincingly argued in her *A History of the Irish Short Story*, however, this dominant realist mode has often led critics to overlook that other strand in Irish short fiction—the strand of the fantastic, the gothic or the metafictional which emerges in the short fiction of writers like Sheridan LeFanu, James Stephens, Elizabeth Bowen and Samuel Beckett and foregrounds themes of “fragmentation or dissolution” (12). the short fiction of contemporary women writers which seeks to “explor[e] the changing nature of femininity and instability of female identity in a playful, postmodernist style” (250). The early short story collections of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Anne Enright and Emma Donoghue are referred to as cases in point

Debbie Brouckmans and Elke D'hoker, , 'Rewriting the Irish Short Story: Emma Donoghue's *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits*,' *Journal of the Short Story in English*, 63: Autumn 2014

[the] **short story cycle**, a hybrid genre mid-way between the loose collection of short stories and the more highly unified form of the novel. Originally defined by Forrest L. Ingram as “a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader’s successive experience of various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts” (19),⁵ the genre has been further analysed and described by critics such as Susan Garland Mann, James Nagel, and Robert M. Luscher. Although there is an ongoing discussion about the appropriate terminology and the precise limits of the genre,⁶ critics agree that the main characteristic of the short story cycle consists of the “simultaneous self sufficiency and interdependence” (Mann 15) of its component parts and that **this simultaneity often gives rise to a tension between diversity and unity**, between “the one and the many,” as Ingram famously put it (19).

***** *Dubliners, The Woman Who Gave Birth To Rabbits***

SYMBOLIC ORGANISATION

Joyce was clear about the sequence of his cycle of stories:

The order of the stories is as follows. ‘The Sisters’, ‘An Encounter’ and another story [‘Araby’] which are stories of my childhood: ‘The Boarding-House’, ‘After the Race’ and ‘Eveline,’ which are stories of adolescence: ‘The Clay’, ‘Counterparts’, and ‘A Painful Case’ which are stories of mature life: ‘Ivy Day in the Committee Room’, ‘A Mother’ and the last story of the book [‘Grace’] which are stories of public life in Dublin. When you remember that Dublin has been a capital for thousands of years, that it is the second city of the British Empire, that it is nearly three times as big as Venice it seems strange that no artist has given it to the world.

(Letter to Stanislaus Joyce)

FORM & MEANING

The dominant form of the Realist Novel, the *Bildungsroman*, is a narrative of individual development marking moves from, variously, the child to the adult, from infant impotence to adult potency, from the unmarried to the married states and hence from family dependency to family responsibility. It also marks the movement from the private sphere of the family to the public sphere of work. All of these shifts focus on the bourgeois individual and the family and work based structures that hold 'him' in place.

Dubliners? This is a narrative of a city's development through fragments of the lives of some of its inhabitants who are all growing up under its paralysing influence (so *not* the individual development of autonomous units). These individual stories move from youth to maturity, from private to public worlds - but these movements do not give them access to any kind of authority or power

PURPOSE OF WRITING

When the soul of man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets”

(James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*).

There was no hope for him this time: it was the third stroke. Night after night I had passed the house (it was vacation time) and studied the lighted square of window: and night after night I had found it lighted in the same way, faintly and evenly. If he was dead, I thought, I would see the reflection of candles on the darkened blind for I knew that two candles must be set at the head of a corpse. He had often said to me: “I am not long for this world,” and I had thought his words idle. Now I knew they were true. Every night as I gazed up at the window I said softly to myself the word *paralysis*. It had always sounded strangely in my ears, like the word *gnomon* in the Euclid and the word *simony* in the Catechism. But now it sounded to me like the name of some maleficent and sinful being. It filled me with fear, and yet I longed to be nearer to it and to look upon its deadly work.

“The Sisters’

PARALYSIS

- Loss or impairment of the ability to move a body part, usually as a result of damage to its nerve supply.
- Loss of sensation over a region of the body.
- Inability to move or function; total stoppage/severe impairment of activity [Latin, fr Greek paralusis, fr *paralūein*, to loosen: para- on one side; para-+lūein, to release.]

GNOMEN

- An object, eg a sundial's stylus, that projects a shadow used as an indicator.
- The geometric figure that remains after a parallelogram has been removed from a similar but larger parallelogram with which it shares a corner. [Latin gnōmōn, fr Greek, interpreter, pointer of a sundial, fr *gignōskein*, to know.]

SIMONY

- The buying or selling of ecclesiastical pardons, offices, or emoluments.
[Middle English simonie, fr Old French, fr Late Latin simōnia, after Simon Magus, a sorcerer who tried to buy spiritual powers fr the Apostle Peter (Acts 8:9-24).]

FREE INDIRECT : INCORPORATING DIFFERENT VOICES

Lily, the caretaker's daughter, was literally run off her feet. Hardly had she brought one gentleman into the little pantry behind the office on the ground floor and helped him off with his overcoat than the wheezy hall-door bell clanged again and she had to scamper along the bare hallway to let in another guest. It was well for her she had not to attend to the ladies also. ("The Dead")

The expression "well for her" is the kind of language a Dubliner of her economic and social caste would use; here, it becomes part of the author's style. Indeed, we can see that the authorial voice of the nineteenth-century writer, which was that of the distinct character of the writer, has become multilingual rather than monolingual. This becomes evident at the opening of the second paragraph:

It was always a great affair, the Misses Morkan's annual dance. Everybody who knew them came to it, members of the family, old friends of the family, the members of Julia's choir, any of Kate's pupils that were grown up enough and even some of Mary Jane's pupils too. Never once had it fallen flat.

Now, this is no longer Lily's voice. The topic has shifted to the opinions of middle-class Dubliners, the typical party guests at this event,

‘GRACE’ WAS ORIGINALLY THE LAST STORY

Looks forward to patchwork language of *Ulysses* and *Finnegan’s Wake*: here the language of religion is corrupted by that of commerce

Jesus Christ was not a hard taskmaster. He understood our little failings, understood the weakness of our poor fallen nature, understood the temptations of this life. We might have had, we all had from time to time, our temptations: we might have, we all had, our failings. But one thing only, he said, he would ask of his hearers. And that was: to be straight and manly with God. If their accounts tallied in every point to say:

“Well, I have verified my accounts. I find all well.”

But if, as might happen, there were some discrepancies, to admit the truth, to be frank and say like a man:

“Well, I have looked into my accounts. I find this wrong and this wrong. But, with God’s grace, I will rectify this and this. I will set right my accounts.” ‘Grace’

FRACTURE & FUSION

the differences between modernism and earlier forms of writing as ‘relative rather than absolute, quantitative rather than altogether qualitative’ (4), and it is the extent to which **this inherent polyvocality or ‘many-voicedness’ of the novel was both emphasised and extended** (MacCabe)

THE EPIPHANY :

a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself’
(Joyce 1973, p. 50)

EPIPHANIES

Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger. (‘Araby’)

All the seas of the world tumbled about her heart. He was drawing her into them: he would drown her. She gripped with both hands at the iron railing.

“Come!”

No! No! No! It was impossible. Her hands clutched the iron in frenzy. Amid the seas she sent a cry of anguish.

“Eveline! Evvy!”

He rushed beyond the barrier and called to her to follow. He was shouted at to go on but he still called to her. She set her white face to him, passive, like a helpless animal. Her eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or recognition. (‘Eveline’)

DISCUSSION

READ the first page of two of the short stories below and think about how they will develop – what will happen ? – and why?

CHILDHOOD/YOUTH

‘An Encounter’

‘Araby’

‘Eveline’

THE FAILURE OF RELATIONSHIPS

‘Clay’

‘A Painful Case’

‘The Dead’

Dorothea Brande, in her classic *Becoming a Writer*, writes that the sort of person who likes to examine her dreams, to write about personal moments of intensity, is probably a short-story writer. If you tend to analyse many characters in depth, to seek motives, you are a novelist. There's something to that. But O'Brien does both. Her portrayals of whole communities have as much precision as her explorations of the most delicate twists and turns of the individual human heart.

...John Banville compares O'Brien to Chekhov. Many a short-story writer is compared to Chekhov, often without much supporting evidence. But in this instance it is not a facile analogy. O'Brien has frequently acknowledged her love for Chekhov's work, and she has learned from him. Like Chekhov she can see and describe the very finest nuances of human feeling, not just the big, strong emotions such as love and hate and envy, which are easy to splash about the canvas of fiction, but all the shadowy subtle shades of emotion that occur between the brash primary colours. "It was not love and it was not hate but something for which there is no name, because to name it would deprive it of its truth."

The sun gave to the bare fields the lustre of ripened hay. That is why people go, for the sun and the scenery— ranges of mountains, their peaks sparkling, an almost cloudless sky, the sea a variety of shades of blue, ceaselessly flickering like a tray of jewels. Yet Eileen wants to go home; to be more precise, she wishes that she had never come. Her son Mark, and his girlfriend, Penny, have become strangers to her and, though they talk and go to the beach and go to dinner, there is between them a tautness. **She sees her age and her separateness much more painfully here than when at home, and she is lost without the props of work and friends.** She sees faults in Penny that she had not noticed before. She is irked that a girl of twenty can be so self-assured, irked at the languid painstaking way that Penny applies her suntan oil, making sure that it covers each inch of her body, then rolling onto her stomach imploring Mark to cover her back completely. At other times Penny is moody, her face buried in a large paperback book with a picture of a girl in a gauze bonnet on the cover. There are other things, too: when they go out to dinner Penny fiddles with the cutlery or the salt and pepper shakers, she is ridiculously squeamish about the food, and offers Mark tastes of things as if he were still a baby.

A wind has risen and in the town itself the houses are no longer startling white but a dun color, like houses robbed of their light. Dustbin lids are rolling along the street and not a child or an adult is in sight. All have gone indoors to avoid the storm. On the water itself boats are like baubles, defenseless against the brewing storm. On the terrace, the canvas chairs have fallen over, and so, too, has her little wooden clotheshorse with its tea towels. As she crosses to retrieve them the umbrella table keels forwards and clouts her. Her mind can jump to only one conclusion — she sees Mark and Penny in a sailboat, Penny exclaiming, Mark jumping and tugging at the sails, trying in vain to steer them to safety. She does not know where Penny's parents live and at once runs to their bedroom to look for her passport. The beautiful childlike face that looks out at her from the passport photograph seems to be speaking to her, begging, asking for clemency. She sees them in the middle of the ocean, flung apart by the waves, like ill- starred lovers in a mythological tale. The next moment she tells herself that Mark is a capable sailor and will lead them to safety. Then she is asking aloud where she will bury them, forgetting that they are lost at sea.

"I think I should go home," she says, lamentably.

"Don't be silly," he says and the look that he gives her is full of both pity and dread. She is on the point of telling him about the day, the scrubland, the youths, the storm, her frenzy, but his eyes, now grave and moist, beg her not to. His eyes ask her to keep this pain, this alarm, to herself.

"What did you do?" he asks nevertheless.

"Oh, lots of jolly things," she says, and the lie has for her, as well as for him, all the sweetness and freshness of truth. For the remainder of the vacation they will behave as if nothing has happened, but of course, something has. They have each looked into the abyss and drawn back, frightened of the primitive forces that lurk there.

Edna O'Brien, 'Storm'

ON FRANK O'CONNOR

O'Connor tried his hand at nearly every literary form, but he is most accurately known as a short story writer. He regarded the difference between the novel and the short story as only incidentally a matter of length, scale and capacity. The real difference, he thought, was in implication. **The novel refers to a world in which it is possible, however difficult, to live: It implies continuity, latitude of possibility, space to breathe.**

The short story may offer the same implication, but it rarely does: In common practice, it presents life mainly in the form of constraint and through the feelings of tramps, widows, spoiled priests, monks and only children. **O'Connor's affection for the short story speaks of his affection for marginal people, men withering, caught in the duress of circumstance and passion.**

Denis Donoghue: Review of *Collected Stories* By Frank O'Connor. *NY Times*,

NEW MODELS

The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits certainly deserves a more detailed and comprehensive critical scrutiny, as it is an important work in many ways. It deserves attention, first of all, as **an instance of the strand of fantasy and fragmentation in the Irish short fiction and, in particular, as part of the postmodern, experimental mode of writing that characterized the Irish short story in the 1990s and early 2000s.** Secondly, it needs to be scrutinized in the context of the larger feminist project of **recovering women's history through the practices of rewriting.** Finally, *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* can also usefully be read from the perspective of **the short story cycle** as it is a tightly-structured collection which displays significant similarities, cross-references and connections between the different stories. In what follows, therefore, Donoghue's collection will be considered within these different critical and generic frameworks in order to highlight the specific contribution it makes to both to the tradition of the Irish short story and to the feminist project of recovering forgotten female voices so as to question the gender and sexual politics of a patriarchal society.

Debbie Brouckmans and Elke D'hoker, 'Rewriting the Irish Short Story: Emma Donoghue's *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits*,' *Journal of the Short Story in English*, 63: Autumn 2014



A The Dancing Master or Diabolist. *S. Andrews*
 B In occult Philosophy searching into the
 Depth of things. *Manningham*
 C The Soterkin Doctor. *Asploughd. Mowbray*

Cunicularii
 or
The Wise men of Godliman in
Consultation
They hold their Talents most adroit
*For any Mystical Exploit. *Hughes**

D The Guilford Rabbit Man. *Midnight. Howard*
 E The Rabbit getter. *Joshua Toft* 1726.
 F The Lady in the straw. *Mary Toft*
 G The Nurse or Rabbit Dresser. *Publ. 25 Dec.*

William Hogarth,
*Cunicularii, or The Wise
 Men of Godliman in
 Consultation* (1726).

(Mary Toft the 'rabbit
 breeder')

In *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits*, these “excluded” and “disadvantaged” are, primarily, women. The fact that Donoghue, in her stories, imaginatively reconstructs the lives of these forgotten or marginalized historical women fits in a larger feminist project of recovery and empowerment. In some stories, the women are literally empowered by being given a voice with which to tell their version of the facts, while in other stories their perspective is revealed through focalisation. The importance of having a voice is referred to by Mary in “The Fox on the Line,” when she ponders in her diary: “Keeping a diary is a monstrous waste of time. But I cannot seem to help it. Without words, we move through life as mute as animals” (29).

As Liedeke Plate and Gayle Greene have argued, this self-conscious attempt to give voice to those women who had been marginalized, misrepresented or forgotten in history or in literature, is one of the central trends in late twentieth-century feminist fiction.

FALL

Harnessed and pillowed in her pod as tight as an unborn, Annie waits. Gives herself up. Too late to uncurl, scramble out, escape this watery fate. Knees to double chin, she can't straighten so much as an elbow. Beyond all hope of an easy way out. Her lid is nailed down and it was she who paid the young boatman to do it, that's the joke.

Her tapered barrel hangs upright in the water, bobbing on its rope. The wicked hag at the end of the fairytale gets packed in a barrel for her just deserts. Annie's mummified in darkness. She adjusts her grip on the handles, twitches in her bindings. Her stomach is empty, in case she might vomit. One of the seams must be starting to give already, because Annie's feet are wet.

Outside, she knows, the afternoon sun is glittering on the crowds that clog both shorelines. The motion picture company will have set their camera rolling. The bookies are offering a thousand to one on Annie coming through. Her manager has her letter in his pocket, fully exonerating him.

EMMA DONOGHUE : REWRITING THE IRISH SHORT STORY

Donoghue uses these techniques of **feminist rewriting and historiographic metafiction in a sequence of seventeen short stories**. It is important, therefore, to take a moment to consider the particular effect of this choice of genre on the meaning of the book in general and Donoghue's feminist project in particular. What this collection of short stories foregrounds, first of all, is **diversity and variety**. Unlike novels which tend to zoom in on one historical frame and one or at most a few female protagonists, the women staged by Donoghue differ considerably in terms of age, class and nationality.

Donoghue's emphasis on women's agency within a structure of confinement and oppression thus offers a correction to this tradition of victimization. As we have seen, some of her characters use and abuse power themselves, while even those who are victimised find ways of resisting patriarchal structures and oppression.

...Donoghue's female characters are not "the weeping piteous victims who flock across the pages of history" (204)

Annie waits while a saw chews the wood a few inches from her head. Light, like an elbow in the eye. Strangers drag her out onto the rocks, she's as dizzy as a faun. Her hands unfurl, greenish blue. The decks of the Maid of the Mist are thick with faces. When Annie staggers to her feet and brushes down her wet trunks, a long cheer goes up. Her barrel's iron hoops are stoved in; the thing looks like flotsam. She manages a curtsy, wipes water off her face that turns out to be blood. Her manager runs forward with a red carnation, and an overcoat to make her decent. But Annie's staring past the sightseers, up up up the cloudy tumult of the Falls. A photograph flashes silver.

Is Annie changed? What does she know now? Why, nothing; nothing more than when the first hands wrenched her into the world 63 years ago, when she was ignorant, eager for the air.

Emma Donoghue

DISCUSSION