Psyche's Sisters: Ambivalence of Sisterhood in Twentieth-century Irish Women's Short Stories[1]

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Abstract. This paper examines and evaluates representations of problematic sisterly relationships in twentieth-century Irish women's stories which display an emphasis on ambivalence and sibling rivalry. The paper is based primarily on the literary output of Mary Lavin, Clare Boylan, Moy McCrory, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Jan Kennedy, Mary Morrissy and Claire Keegan. The paper seeks, by reference both to feminist studies and Irish women's short stories, to demonstrate the consequences and causes of a divided sisterhood which itself may be traced back to a suppression of expression of female solidarity embedded in western culture and manifested in western literary heritage. Typically, such stories depict a conflict sourced in the need to develop self-identity and framed within the constraints imposed by separate social roles. This kind of conflict results potentially in rivalry, antagonism, ambivalence, and the domination of one sibling by another. Daughters/sisters are often depicted in these stories both as competing with each other for limited resources and also as seeking a sense of personal identity through mutual polarisation. There are also stories into which are woven undertones of domination disguised as sisterly closeness, for which the actual motivation seems to be a repressed aspiration for intimacy.

Key Words. Sisterhood, ambivalence, rivalry, antagonism, polarisation.

Resumen. Este artículo examina y evalúa representaciones de relaciones problemáticas entre hermanas en relatos de mujeres irlandesas del siglo XX que hacen hincapié en la ambivalencia y la rivalidad fraternas. El trabajo se basa principalmente en la obra de Mary Lavin, Clare Boylan, Moy McCrory, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Jan Kennedy, Mary Morrissy y Claire Keegan. Su objetivo, tanto en lo relativo a los estudios feministas como a los relatos breves de mujeres irlandesas, es demostrar las consecuencias y las causas de una hermandad femenina dividida, que a su vez puede remontarse a la supresión de expresiones de solidaridad femenina arraigada en la cultura occidental y manifestada en el patrimonio literario occidental. Generalmente estos relatos describen un conflicto originado por la necesidad de desarrollar una identidad propia y enmarcado en las restricciones impuestas por la separación de los roles sociales. Esta clase de conflicto potencialmente causa rivalidad, antagonismo, ambivalencia y la dominación de una hermana por parte de otra. En estos relatos hijas/hermanas son descritas compitiendo entre sí por unos recursos limitados, así como buscando un sentido de identidad personal a través de la polarización mutua. También hay relatos en los que se intercalan matices de dominación disfrazados de proximidad fraternal, cuya motivación real parece ser una aspiración de intimidad reprimida.

Palabras clave. Relación entre hermanas, ambivalencia, rivalidad, antagonismo, polarización.

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Introduction

Sisterhood or bonding between women is one of the core themes which is both celebrated and emphasised in women's writing. Twentieth-century Irish female writers also explore in depth these characteristics of woman-to-woman relationships in their stories. However, while there are certainly stories which celebrate the positive aspects of sisterhood or solidarity between women, a striking feature of stories by Irish women writers is the recurrent motif of suppressed or divided sisterhood. This pattern of "troubled" sisterhood is evident in the way Irish female writers set about constructing the characters in their stories. The focus of this paper is an examination and evaluation of this ambivalence as represented in twentieth-century Irish women's stories by Mary Lavin, Clare Boylan, Moy McCrory, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Jan Kennedy, Mary Morrissy and Claire Keegan. In this paper it is also argued that, notwithstanding the setting of these stories within a context which reflects Irish social traditions and issues, the ambivalence referred to above is one which mirrors the broader literary heritage of the English speaking world.

The "troubled sister" plot pattern has ancient roots in western literature constructed within a patriarchal framework. According to Nina Auerbach and Amy K. Levin, female power is expressed in fairy tales and mythology through solidarity within female communities, and sisterhood is routinely suppressed in such sources in order that heroism and heterosexuality may flourish (Auerbach 1982: 1-33; Levin 1992: 22-24).[2]

2. In Greek mythology, for example, the heroism of Heracles or Theseus is defined in part by their ability to confront and disperse the solidarity of ferocious women such as the Amazons, or by the loss of the communal eye of the Graeæ, which contributes to the successful killing of the Gorgons by Perseus. The tale of the Graeæ sisters in Greek/Roman mythology is a classic example suggesting that solidarity between sisters can be undermined by separating them. In this story, it is regarded as "heroic" to weaken or even demolish sisterhood insofar as the hero, Perseus, successfully achieves his goal to conquer another triad of sisters, the Gorgons, by dividing the Graeæ sisters and playing one off against another. This has been interpreted as an allegory which seems to express

The story of Psyche, Levin argues, provides a paradigm of the female quest for womanhood within a patriarchal social framework which suppresses the solidarity of women.[2] This story may therefore be regarded as a patriarchal allegory describing women's conformity to heterosexuality. According to Levin and based on Erich Neumann's interpretation, Psyche's reunion with her husband is eventually achieved by coming to terms with her own *femininity* (Levin 1992: 23). The new priorities of her life are symbolised by acceptance of the task of sorting seeds, with the assistance of natural forces, as well as by separation from her sisters through the death of the latter. These sisters are prosecuted for their open expressions of hostility and their "verbal seduction", the latter traditionally reserved as a kind of "male behaviour", thus implying the breach of a taboo by transgressing gender norms (Levin 1992: 43).[4] The moral lesson and the warning expressed in the story of Psyche may lie in the potential danger posed both by the sisters'

the message that sisterhood "appears powerless against the hero's theft of the communal eye" (Auerbach 1982: 3). When the communal eye of (the Graeæ) sisters is lost, sisterhood itself (symbolised by the Gorgons) is doomed. "Cinderella" is another typical example of this motif of suppressed sisterhood. Invariably such stories depict sisters who disagree and who are polarised both in appearance and in behaviour. Before a "happy ending", typically marriage, can be achieved, sisters must be separated from or abandon or betray one another. In stories such as "Beauty and the Beast" and "Cinderella", for example, the sisters are polarised by their appearance (beautiful innocent Cinderella as opposed to ugly wicked sisters) and, in "Cinderella", sisters are further distanced by their stepsister relationship. For more see Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, *Childhood and Household Tales* by the Brothers Grimm, Nina Auerbach's *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* and Levin's *The Suppressed Sister: A Relationship in Novels by Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Women*.

3. For more about the story of "Cupid and Psyche" see Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*.

4. See also Neumann, Erich, *Amor and Psyche: The Psychic Development of the Feminine, A Commentary on the Tale by Apuleius* for further details.

openly expressed contempt for Psyche's happiness, itself the result of feelings of jealousy and rivalry, and also in their capacity for solidarity as when they conspire together to give damaging advice to their sister. This threatens the happy marriage of the heroine, a motif which recurs in other fairy tales and mythologies. The double bind of supportive sisterhood lies in the fact that, on the one hand, it seeks to preserve a harmonious relationship among sisters within the specific family ideal glorified by conventional society and this desire for harmony suppresses any underlying rivalry. On the other hand, this perceived supportiveness creates anxiety about the sisters being too close, thus neglecting or even dismissing what is assumed to be their primary duty and goal, which is to be wives and mothers, and threatening in the process the existing patriarchal system which favours heterosexuality.

From this perspective the story of Psyche may be regarded as an archetype, typical of and also exemplifying a recurrent pattern of ambivalence towards sisterhood in literature or fairy tales from different times and cultures. The representations of these seemingly troubled sisters in twentieth-century Irish women's stories also seem to uncover a disguised female unrest deriving from the frustration of being isolated within a patriarchal society in which sisterly bonds are to be controlled.

Blossoms on one stem: ambiguity and ambivalence of Irish sister plot

Mary Lavin's "Frail Vessel" can be viewed as a reworking of the story of Psyche and her sisters.[5] Lavin's story also depicts the struggle between the choice of being sister or lover. In the end, the sister bond wins out and the lovers are separated. In "Frail Vessel" the division between sisters is even emphasised by depicting the elder sister Bedelia as a strong-willed mother figure in contrast to her frail, thin, naive younger sister Liddy, a child-woman aged only sixteen. Again, Bedelia's practicality and Liddy's sentimentality and youth polarise the sisters in their personalities, behaviour and choices for life. Bedelia disapproves of and

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5. "Frail Vessel" was first published in *The Patriot Son and Other Stories* in 1956. This story was later republished and collected in first volume of *The Stories of Mary Lavin* in 1964.

dismisses Liddy's behaviour as silly, unrealistic, inexperienced and simple-minded when Liddy is attracted to and intoxicated by what Bedelia regards as the sentimental nonsense of a slippery, sloppy solicitor named Alphonsus O'Brien, and becomes his sweetheart. Bedelia obviously despises such sentimentality as nonsense, as exemplified in her words:

> You know – all that rubbish he went on with – about you being the only one in the world for him – and that he was waiting all those years for you. How can you stand that kind of talk? It's so meaningless (Lavin 1964: 7).

Bedelia's remarks about Liddy's marriage display contempt, such as when she says Liddy is too young for marriage, the husband-to-be is too old for Liddy, and also, that there is no practical financial basis for a promising married life. However, perhaps Bedelia's contempt results not just from the potential loss of her sister but also from her feeling of unease towards the implications of this marriage for the way she defines herself and her role in life. Bedelia's concern for Liddy appears to derive from her self-proclaimed role as guardian for her little sister, partly also from the practical consideration of the loss of her sister's assistance in the household chores. However, underlying all of this is jealousy based on the "dissimilarities" between her and her sister:

> [Bedelia] was suddenly shot through and through with irritation. Why did this business about Liddy have to blow up on the verge of her own wedding? Goodness know, she [Bedelia] hadn't expected much fuss to be made about her own marriage, what with not being out of mourning, and Daniel having always lived in the house anyway; but it did seem a bit unfair to have all this excitement blow up around Liddy. Two rare, very rare, and angry tears squeezed out of Bedelia's pale eyes, and fell down her plain round cheeks. Because, of course, mourning or no mourning, a young girl like Liddy wasn't likely to get married in serge! … But this last thought made her feel more bitter than ever because it seemed to her suddenly that it was a measure of the difference between them as brides. Already she could imagine the fuss there would be over Liddy – the exclamations and the signs of pity and admiration. Such a lovely bride! Whereas when she – oh, but it was so unfair because never at any time did she regard her own marriage as anything but a practical expedient. It was only that she hadn't counted

on being up against this comparison. It was that she minded (Lavin 1964: 4).

Even at the end of the story, when Liddy is supposed to be devastated by the separation from her husband and an uncertain future, her mysterious glee particularly annoys Bedelia because it is something she can neither understand nor share:

> Yet Liddy never seemed to have pondered it at all. Her body, beautiful, frail even in its fertility, was still a vessel for some secret happiness Bedelia never knew, and although she hadn't known it, what she wanted, all the time, was to break it. She thrust herself forward, thrust her face, that was swollen with the strain she had undergone into the face, still so serene, in front of her (Lavin 1964: 19).

Just like Psyche's sisters, Bedelia also seeks to render Liddy unhappy. In doing so, Bedelia is trying to make Liddy resemble herself by demolishing their dissimilarities. Such behaviour among sisters illustrates an ambiguity due to "an essential desire for closeness, a longing to merge, existing in opposition to the need for separation" (Levin 1992: 43).

Bedelia's efforts to try to dissuade Liddy from the marriage do not succeed. Nevertheless, she later "seduces" Liddy successfully into separating from her husband, who is in financial trouble. However the story ends with an ironic anticlimax. Liddy presents herself as pregnant, which the conniving Bedelia did not expect in her plan to try to reunite with her little sister within the family (an obstacle also for the help which Bedelia, also heavily pregnant, may be expecting once again from Liddy with the household chores). Although the lovers are separated and, on the surface, sisterhood seems to have triumphed over love, on another level sisterhood is seen to have been defeated by the legacy of patriarchal power as symbolised by the unborn baby conceived from Liddy's husband, whom Bedelia loathes so much. The implication is that Bedelia is being punished for showing her contempt (in refusing initially to help her sister with the rent bill) as well as for the boldness of her "verbal seduction" in seeking to separate the lovers (through the terms she imposed for helping her sister and husband out of their financial trouble). Although Bedelia does not pay with her life, unlike Psyche's sisters, she

may be eternally punished by having to take on a triple maternal responsibility (her own baby, her sister Liddy and also Liddy's baby) as well as the associated burden of expenditure, the factor which bothers her the most.

The problem of antagonism between sisters sometimes manifests itself in a dilemma between an instinct towards assimilation with one another and a parallel instinct for a distinct personal identity which drives sisters to seek separation from one another. Louise Bernikow has indicated the apparent paradox of separation and sameness within the sister bond:

> Competition seems to be the language we use for the process of separation, seems to be the kind of activity we throw up against the desire to merge.... Boys are encouraged to leave mother, punished for not doing so; girls are encouraged to stay with mother, punished for leaving. When these forces [of separation from the mother] turn lateral, the process is played out among sisters (Bernikow 1980: 99).

Hence, the paradoxical nature of the relationship between sisters appears to be characterised by both "polarization and interdependence" (Levin 1992: 37). In the scenario of the Freudian Oedipus complex, girls, unlike boys, are believed to find it harder to develop a sense of separate identity differentiation from the (same-sex) mother. If this Freudian analysis is accepted, sisters, like blossoms growing on one stem, may find it even more difficult than brothers to try to establish a sense of individuality between one another because they see each other as in an identical position in the family hierarchy, each sister in a subordinate position to the mother (but nevertheless a rival), and in competition for the attention of the father, or later, other men. Although feminist psychologists have questioned the Freudian view of female development, Freudianism may at least illustrate a valid phenomenon that has been constructed under the influence of patriarchal structures in western culture and society.

Clare Boylan's "Gods and Slaves" and Moy McCrory's "The O'Touney Sisters and the Day of Reckoning" appear to illustrate the tensions induced by rivalry which alienates sisters who compete for male attention.[6] In the story "Gods

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6. "Gods and Slaves" was collected in *That Bad Woman* in 1995. This story was later republished

and Slaves", the sisters appear as amiable and harmonious when performing on stage as a marvellous singing group. However, their attempts to compete for the attention of Phelim, a male tutor, interrupt this harmony because it is "the primary object of mating, which is to make other women jealous…They grew anxious, inert, waiting for him to make the difficult choice between them" (Boylan 2000: 329). These sisters are divided by the impulse to exclude "other women", and therefore they become rivals in this love game. The sisters in Moy McCrory's "The O'Touney Sisters and the Day of Reckoning" play a similar game although it is never explicitly mentioned in the story. On the surface the antagonism between the two sisters Brid and Mary seems due to their polarised views on religion (religious Mary versus atheistic Brid). However the main storyline has an undercurrent which suggests that it is the marriage of the narrator's parents, Mary and the farmhand, which actually distances Brid from Mary. The plot deals with Mary's interpretation of her and Brid's rescue by the farmhand as a miracle, and with the surprising hospitality extended by their stingy Aunt Liddy. These, in a sense, suppress the underlying alienation in the relationship between Brid and Mary. But this alienation is somehow reflected by the way in which Brid has gradually changed, growing out of the young laughing girl she used to be, and turning later into a spinster of "tiredness" and "bitterness". The narrator seems to have sensed this distance between them when she says: "[b]ut to me they were always distant with each other, the remnants of sisterhood only present in their furious arguments" (McCrory 1993: 37). This statement reveals that a factor which cannot be directly addressed has perhaps become central in their relationship with each other. Bernikow argues that this kind of compelling competition for male attention or for authority between women is the way "masculine power" manifests itself to isolate women. This woman alone – "motherless, sister-

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and collected in Clare Boylan's *Collected Short Stories* in 2000. The story "The O'Touney Sisters and the Day of Reckoning" was first published in *the Irish Times* in 1990, and was republished and collected in *Virgins and Hyacinths* by the Attic Press in 1993.

less, friendless – can fix her eyes solely on father, brother, lover, and therefore peace will reign in the universe" (Bernikow 1980: 77). The polarisation is sometimes manifested in an oppositional duality of good and bad, comparing one child to the other(s) in order to establish their separate identities. Elizabeth Fishel thinks that good and bad do not necessarily refer to absolutes but vary depending upon the definitions in different families (Fishel 1979: 121-2). A good child may generally be decoded as a child who is adult-orientated, sharing adult values and fulfilling parental expectations whilst a "bad" one may mean the rebellious, angry child resistant to parental control and who turns to peers for a sense of identity (Fishel 1979:121-2). These labels are like different informal roles which are assigned to each daughter and act as a model that Robert W. White speculates may be a catalyst for an ongoing situation of underlying tension within the sister relationship:

> [A good child and a bad child] come into existence because they serve some purpose in the family social system, helping at least to describe the members, define their relations, and make things somewhat more predictable. They continue as long as they serve this purpose and perhaps, out of inertia, for some time beyond; but if the pattern becomes too frustrating for one member, or if it ceases to perform its function for the group, informal role assignments may change or fade out (White 1976: 96).

This process of polarisation may make each daughter in the family an incomplete person, denying them the chance to develop fully their potential as individuals. Since they are tied together within the family unit, so they seek fulfilment through one another instead of through their own agencies (Downing 1988, 2007: 139). Echoing Downing's view, Toni McNaron claims that polarisation acts as an "unspoken, unconscious, pact that neither sister need develop all her potential" (McNaron 1985: 8). This has the consequence that women remain within a smaller social framework, attached to and submissive to the family, because each woman "depend[s] upon the other to continue to act in certain ways" (McNaron 1985: 8). The need for self-definition among sisters which results from the identical position

of girls (sisters) in the family hierarchy leads them to insist on their differences and in a way reveals why sisters always seem to define themselves in opposition to each other. It appears that the "mutual self-definition seems typically to proceed by way of polarization that half-consciously exaggerates the perceived differences and attributes of the sisters" (Downing 1988, 2007: 12).

This emphasis on the polarisation of sisters either in appearance or personality is evident in the depiction of sisters in various stories by Irish female writers such as in Claire Keegan's "Sisters", Jan Kennedy's "June 23rd" or Mary Lavin's "A Bevy of Aunts" and "Lilacs".[7] In Mary Lavin's "A Bevy of Aunts", for example, one sister differs from the other in the way she dresses, behaves or the life she lives, each having her "endearing individual mannerism" (Lavin 1985a: 113). Sometimes sisters are defined not on the basis of their individuality but in a comparative sense by the reflection of one another. Moreover, sisters may even seem to have an identity only in terms of their relationship with each other. However, and ironically, the sister with the apparent "good" character is not necessarily the winner in any rivalry between the sisters, and the "bad" one may be the one who leads the more exciting and affluent lifestyle. In "Lilacs", there is a strong-willed sister, Kate, who fights against the patriarchal authority (their father) in the family. By contrast, her younger sister is frail, passive and only endures and obeys the father's will. However, being a "good", in other words, submissive, daughter is not rewarded in this story. In the end, ironically, the rebellious sister (the "bad" one) has achieved a better future, signified by a marriage which reflects her own desire and choice, whilst the obedient one is left with nothing but shattered dreams and loss.

In stories like Jan Kennedy's "June 23rd" and Claire Keegan's "Sisters", the devoted daughter at home seems to be presented as *dull* or irritating to those with whom she interacts. For example, Martha, the spinster sister in "June 23rd", becomes the one whom her parents

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7. "Lilacs" was first published in *Tales from Bective Bridge* in 1942. This story was later republished and collected in the third volume of *The Stories of Mary Lavin* in 1985.

"always [get] a bit tight-lipped and sulky with" (Kennedy 1985: 180). Despite being a devoted and caring daughter for the parents, Martha appears contrasted with the "lively, creative, happily-married" Edwina. In "Sisters", Betty is the dedicated, plain-looking, strong willed and *clever* spinster daughter while her sister Louisa is portrayed the passive, beautiful and self-centered (also happily-married) one. The polarisation which characterises these sisters is somehow reinforced by parental intervention such as when Betty's and Louisa's mother describes them as "chalk and cheese" in "Sisters" (Keegan 1999: 146). Louisa is described as a pretty girl, popular among men, with beautiful golden hair and a sweet smile with plentiful white teeth. In contrast, Betty is dull, has brown hair, a "hard and masculine" palm and "look[s] terrible when [she] smile[s]" (Keegan 1999: 151). These oppositional characteristics not only distance Betty and Louisa in appearance but also determine the choices they supposedly make in their lives, whether willingly or not, such as their marital status. In both "Sisters" and "June 23rd", all the glamour seems to belong to the pretty sister. The pretty one receives admiration and affection from parents and other people, and she leads a lifestyle which is envied by the other sister, the plain, hardworking, home-centred one. Underneath the apparent amiability between the sisters lies alienation. At one point, in "June 23rd", Martha attempts to *justify* to herself her selfish sister, who has not taken the responsibility of looking after their elderly parents at home while she (Martha) has been forced to do this herself: "How could I expect an energetic 20-year-old with such talent to give it all up and come home to look after mother and father?" (Kennedy 1985: 179) Nonetheless, underneath Martha feels ambivalent about this. At another point Martha is also bitter about the fact that she is the one without a life of her own:

But then it's easier to have plenty to say if you're only here for two weeks. Easy to have plenty of stories when you have an office full of people to talk to every day, a husband who adores you and a social life that never seems to slow down. "Damn", Martha said to herself, "that's twice in one day. I really must not go over all that again" (Kennedy 1985: 179).

Martha and Betty perceive that what they have sacrificed for their family at the expense of their own welfare, such as marriage and social life, is actually something of which their sisters, Edwina and Louisa, have dispossessed them. These suppressed feelings turn into a repressed anger and pain which results in their rejection of their sisters at the end of both stories – Martha is no longer prepared to give in to her selfish sister by ruining her own holiday and Betty will not agree to take her sister back into her home. Instead, Betty provokes a separation with her sister by the act of cutting off Louisa's beautiful hair of which she is so proud. What Betty seeks to demolish may be not just Louisa's pride but also the pretended harmony in her relationship with Louisa, which has become a source of contempt for her. Eventually, the conflict between the sisters surfaces in both stories. No matter which sister attempts to resolve the conflict in order to maintain a surface amiability in the family which conforms to socially accepted norms, the polarised division of roles between them becomes a major source of friction. This *surface amiability* within the family which presumes devotion between sisters may also evoke a repressed desire for closeness. Sisters being powerless themselves in the face of the power wielded by the authority of the family or society, their repressed desire for closeness is frequently manifested through one sister's attempt to control her sibling. It seems that one of the factors underlying such contradictory behaviour between sisters may be the unfulfilled longing for intimacy. However, this is also related to the divided roles created by the framework within which sisters interact with each other. In Mary Lavin's "Frail Vessel", Bedelia reflects just such a longing for intimacy with Liddy by presenting herself as a mother figure to her sister. Bedelia is deeply disappointed by Liddy's behaviour, turning against her due to the row about Liddy's intention to marry a stranger of whom Bedelia disapproves:

> "Liddy," she said sharply, "I hope" – she paused – "you know how I have always felt towards you, like a mother" – she caught herself up – "well anyway, like a guardian," she corrected, "but perhaps lately with my own taking up so much of my time I may not have given you as much supervision as I used – as much as you should have had perhaps – I can only hope that

you haven't abused your freedom in any way?" (Lavin 1964: 7).

Bedelia is angry because Liddy is so ungrateful: "Bedelia felt just like as if a mean trick had been played on her! After all I've done for her! She thought. After being a mother to her!" (Lavin 1964: 5) The way Bedelia still regards Liddy as a child reflects Bedelia's resistance to acceptance of the fact that Liddy is, after all, an individual with her own ideas which cannot be controlled by Bedelia. Liddy's desire for independence may be what hurts Bedelia most – or rather, the consequence of this desire for independence, which is the potential loss of intimacy with Liddy. Hence Bedelia sees Liddy's desire to separate from her, from this family, as an act of betrayal. This relationship is rendered unstable and troubled by the contradictory perspectives which each has on the meaning of sisterhood and what sisterhood means in their interaction with each other. In "Frail Vessel" one sister's possessiveness towards the other sister turns into hostility and opposition when the latter tries to break away from the former. Sisters' ambiguous feelings of intimacy towards one another can sometimes lead both to attempts by the one to dominate the other and to hostility by this individual if the attempt at domination fails.

This desire for domination, disguised as sisterly closeness, is expressed as ambivalence about such closeness in Mary Morrissy's stories "Rosa" and "Agony Aunt". In "Rosa", the narrator is presented as a caring elder sister, devoted to her sister Rosa, for whom she is even willing to commit a murder in order to resolve her sister's problem. On the one hand, the narrator describes how she and Rosa are emotionally interdependent with each other: "it seems that without her I would barely exist, that I would be a mere spectre, passing in and out unseen through the sullen doorways of her life" (Morrissy 1993: 27). On the other hand, the narrator feels uneasy that Rosa still reserves some space which she does not share: "Was it then I passed over into Rosa's world? No, even then, there were corners of it into which she retreated that I could only guess at" (Morrissy 1993: 31).

The narrator's longing to "merge with" her sister uncovers her ambivalence towards the intimacy of her sister's involvement with her

lover as well as towards the impact on their relationship of her sister's experience of sexual love. The narrator behaves as if she wishes to protect her sister but in fact what she seeks to demolish is the intrusion into their relationship by her sister's lover. The narrator reveals that she imagines "a coldness in their [Rosa's and her lover's] pleasure" and expects "he would abandon her, and [the narrator] simply wait[s]" (Morrissy 1993: 29). Then the narrator and Rosa would still cling to each other and face their lives together with their closeness secured between them.

Likewise, the narrator in another story by Mary Morrissy, "Agony Aunt", expresses a similar desire for intimacy with her sister, coupled with ambivalence. The manner in which the narrator juxtaposes both positive and critical remarks about her sister (whose name is not mentioned save through the alias, Mavis, in the story) invokes a feeling of ambiguity in this story in respect of their sense of sisterhood. On the one hand the narrator appears to be delighted at the prospect of Mavis becoming a mother: "I think she'd [Mavis] make a wonderful mother…[s]he has a practical, capable air which inspires confidence. She is big-boned and ample – for God's sake, she's looked like a mother for years" (Morrissy 1993: 192-3). On the other hand, the narrator recalls Mavis's dislike of children and questions her motivation for having children, implying with distaste that Mavis is simply attempting to prove her capability for childbearing instead of expressing a genuine maternal instinct. Although the narrator claims "Mavis and [she] have always been close", actually the narrator's reminiscences tell a very different story (Morrissy 1993: 197). They convey an anxiety expressed through fragments in her memory, which recall how she (the narrator) was excluded by Mavis's "close-down look" at the girly party, her "strange, savage" smile, the traumatic experience of Mavis seeing how the narrator was conceived through the ferocious "rape" of their mother, and Mavis' hostility towards the narrator as an unborn baby – "'Mavis looked as if she might kill me that day'. She [mother] paused. 'But I think it was you she was after…'" (Morrissy 1993: 202). Such memories resurface as an expression of the narrator's anxiety about the true nature of the relationship with her sister and also through the pretext of her agonising about Mavis's

suitability as a mother in this story.

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's "At Sally Gap" evokes another form of anxiety and ambiguity for want of intimacy in sisterhood. Orla and Kathleen in "At Sally Gap" can only retain a sisterly relationship by physically separating from each other. The only trace of emotion they share is expressed through the tension and sense of malice between them: "The grim smile, the tight-lipped jokes, all make sense" (Ní Dhuibhne 2001: 145). When their "common ground" is uprooted by the death of their mother, their relationship is bound to collapse. Orla herself feels a sense of ambiguity about her relationship with her sister although, ironically, Orla claims she "always likes" her sister. Nonetheless, this claim by Orla of a sisterly bond swiftly resurfaces as a murderous anxiety and suspicion that Kathleen 'always' dislikes and intends to hurt her. Eventually this ticking time bomb explodes:

Orla notices a lump in the big pocket of her kaftan. It could be a bottle. A book. A knife. A gun. Kathleen is mad enough to kill her. Suddenly Orla realizes that her sister has always hated her. She has hated her….The reluctant visits, the dearth of invitations. They have never gone shopping together. They have never had a tête-à-tête, a girly drink. Always meeting at funerals, at their mother's house, at Christmas in the bosom of their families. Orla has always liked Kathleen but Kathleen hates Orla. It's clear. And now at last she has a real reason for hating her, and a motivation for hurt (Ní Dhuibhne 2001: 145).

Orla's illusion that she can keep this sisterly relationship with Kathleen is eventually dispelled by Orla's provocative act of betrayal in having a love affair with Kathleen's husband, to which Kathleen does not turn a blind eye this time. Perhaps deep down Orla dislikes Kathleen as much as Kathleen hates her. The sisterhood between Orla and Kathleen is then demolished and they are separated eternally by the Irish Sea.

Conclusion

The Irish women's stories examined in this paper demonstrate a thematic continuity in sister-focused plots which appears consistent with depictions of divided sisterhood in the heritage of western culture and literature. In this respect, Mary Lavin's sister stories written from the 1940s and 50s reflect closely the

literary imagery of her younger counterparts from the 1980s and 90s such as Clare Boylan, Moy McCrory, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Jan Kennedy, Mary Morrissy and Claire Keegan.

Annis Pratt claims that women's writing can be viewed as a vehicle for powerful social reform as well as personal development. Women's "escape through imagination," according to Pratt, is strategic, a "withdrawal into the unconscious for the purpose of personal transformation" because women writers present their stories in "such a way that their novels become vehicles for social change" (Pratt 1982: 177). Looked at from this perspective, women's writing can be seen as a symbolic vehicle indicating a meaning, a vehicle which "asks questions, poses riddles, cries out for restitution", while also remaining "rhetorical" (Pratt 1982: 177). It is debatable whether Irish women's stories can become such an active catalyst for social change as Pratt has optimistically proposed or whether Irish women writers, through their fiction, express intentionally their political consciousness, as argued by Christine St. Peter.[8] Nonetheless, Irish women's stories certainly *do ask questions* and *pose riddles*, and this aspect connects with the perspective of Ailbhe Smyth, who argues that Irish women's stories *subvert* by unveiling paradoxes within prescribed patriarchal gender roles and ideology.[9] The feminist temperament which has been documented in the Irish women's short stories examined in this paper also recalls Annis Pratt's point that female writers who escape from patriarchal control through imagination are not "escapist" but "strategic".

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8. Christine St. Peter has argued that women's literature inscribing "such political analysis in narrative", is "a part of the cultural life of women's liberation movement and has helped to create the social revolution" in *Changing Ireland: Strategies in Contemporary Irish Women's Fiction*, pp.151-2.

9. Nevertheless, some Irish female writers who were also feminist activists such as Maeve Kelly, Mary Dorcey or Evelyn Conlon certainly do not remain "merely rhetorical, an artefact or idea rather than an action" as Pratt has claimed in *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*, p.177. For more also see Introduction in Christine St. Peter's *Changing Ireland*; Introduction in Ailbhe Smyth's *Wildish Things: An Anthology of New Irish Women's Writing* and Introduction in Janet Madden-Simpson's *Women's Part: An Anthology of Short Fiction by and About Irish Women 1890-1960*.

This notion of a "strategy of female writers" leads effectively to the central point that this paper seeks to address – the motifs of sisters' mutual rejection, anger, agony of rivalry or alienation are employed in Irish women's stories to ridicule and redress the paradox of the distorted sisterly relationship, which features alienation and contempt, welded under patriarchy.

Biological sisters are not necessarily like those people with whom one may establish a bond through one's freewill. Whether sisters can get along with each other or not, a sister cannot be replaced by choice. Each female child in the family is defined by comparison with the other, because each is interdependent on the other for a sense of identity within the totality of this family. If a family is constructed under this discourse, each individual female will inevitably face a dilemma in respect of identification (and identity) as well as individuality. Perhaps due to this inter-connection, sisterhood between blood sisters sometimes tends to generate difficulties for the individual development of these females because any such development must itself involve an element of mutual separation. Blood sisters are intertwined with one another as "blossoms on one stem". Sisters encouraged to be harmonious and supportive, at least on the surface, instead of expressing overt rivalry with one another, are often ambivalent towards such a sisterhood which may sometimes be too intense to endure. Frequently, there is an underlying conflict between a search for individual development and the pressure to submerge this individual development in the intimacy of sisterhood. On the one hand, sisters seek their own separate uniqueness. On the other hand, sisters may not be delighted to accept dissimilarity, such as in respect of their happiness in life, when one compares herself to the situation of the other. Whenever one party uses force in an attempt to overwhelm the other, the balance and harmony within the relationship between sisters are bound to be disrupted. This dilemma is frequently displayed in Irish women's stories in the form of one sister who seeks to dominate her sibling by creating clearly defined roles or emphasising disparity in character and appearance. Nonetheless, in reality this urge to differentiate may, in fact, be a reflection of their inseparable

inseparable identification and repressed desire for intimacy with each other. Within such a framework each sister seems to act so as to shape one other into a common identity so as to achieve a sense of wholeness in the family unit (Downing 1988, 2007: 139).

The motifs of ambivalence presented in Irish women's stories about sororal relationships expose the paradoxes and distortions underlying sisterly conflict and rivalry, which serve to undermine any systematic trend for sisters and women in general to become "too close" in a social framework which traditionally endorsed and imposed a gender-based apartheid in respect of social roles. Irish women writers may reveal certain misogynistic notions and fears through literary portrayals which contain an undertone of sisterly discord. That groups of women are shown, as a recurrent stereotypical literary image, oppressing each other and fighting against one another, perhaps exemplifies that female "grossness" which Mary Wollstonecraft criticised, and the "cattiness and disloyalty" of the female jungle, which Elizabeth Janeway argues was shaped by rivalry for male approval within the patriarchal social framework (Janeway 1975: 7; Auerbach 1982: 12-15). The distorted intimacy of sisterhood which results in conflict among women can be expressed and exemplified by using a narrative framework which utilises an Irish social context while at the same time reflecting, building upon and adapting models of sister relationships supplied by the broader literary heritage of the English-speaking world. If women can be conditioned successfully and consistently to conform to the 'divide and conquer' arrangement evidenced in so many of the stories discussed in this paper, then the patriarchal status quo can be maintained within the framework of a stable male-female ecosystem. It is obvious that women in conflict with each other will not able to consolidate collective power in such a way as to present a meaningful challenge to the existing framework.

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