

## SUBVERTING THE IDEAL OF WOMANHOOD: MARY LAVIN'S "SARAH" AND FEMALE AGENCY

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### Abstract

Women's living conditions in the Republic of Ireland in the 1940s were strongly conditioned by Catholic beliefs since the Church still held great influence at institutional levels and maintained close relations to leading politicians. The 1937 Constitution was the clearest proof of such relation, and tried to confine women's role merely to the functions of wife and mother. The short story "Sarah," written by Mary Lavin (1943), discloses the patriarchal standards and stifling social mores imposed on women at the time. Sarah, the eponymous character, endures the life of being an unmarried mother in a conservative and merciless society. In this paper, we argue that, in spite of being inserted in such constrictive environment, Sarah manifests a position of agency, to the extent that she does not conform with such pre-established moral and socially acceptable behaviors.

**Keywords:** Irish Literature; Short Fiction; Mary Lavin; Sarah; Female Agency.

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## Introduction

When World War II broke out in 1939, less than two decades had passed since Ireland's War of Independence and the Civil War. In the outbreak of the war in Europe, De Valera's government declared Ireland's neutrality in the conflict. Although most of the population and even the Irish government hoped for a victory of the Allies, manifestations of any sort were forbidden so as not to influence people's opinions about either side (Brown 160). The "Emergency" years, referring to the war period from 1939 to 1945, are considered by many a lost period in Irish history, for Ireland's isolation caused "economic depredations" (Brown 164) and decline, leading to fuel shortage as well as food and energy rationing by the government. The country's posture of neutrality affected the reception of Irish writers' works in England, which was then a great consumer of literature produced in Ireland. The resistance of journals and publishing houses to welcome Irish writing together with paper shortage left Irish writers in "positions of desperate financial insecurity, for no writer could imagine making a living on Irish sales alone" (Brown 164).

Some critics, nonetheless, disagree with the wide-spread idea of the "lost years" regarding the Emergency period. Brown himself counter-argues that the isolation lived was in no means different from the one Ireland had been through before, in the years that preceded the war: "the entire period since independence, it must be remembered, had been characterized by an isolationism encouraged by official ideology and protected by censorship" (163).

As pointed out by Roy Foster, de Valera's vision of a rural Ireland, largely neglecting the more industrial cities like Dublin and Cork, was part of an ideal in keeping the Irish peasant way of life. Bare basic conditions of life, poor sanitation, and diseases such as tuberculosis were a reality in Ireland's rural towns. The dissatisfaction with de Valera's policies led to the maintenance of the reality of an "emigrating population," which would only change after the decrease of opportunity for emigrants in other countries together with the government's efforts to "counterweight the pull towards emigration" (Foster 538-540).

The period in which Éamon de Valera was in charge is often regarded as strict and conservative. That might be related to his involvement with the Catholic Church and closeness to leaders in this institution. That became clear when in 1937 the government published a new draft Constitution that "reaffirmed many Catholic beliefs and values" (Beaumont 574). Such influence was strongly felt by specific groups within Irish society, and caused anxiety especially for non-Catholics and women (Lee 207).

As a result of such policies and with the overt support given by the State, the Catholic Church used its religious homogeneity to exert its ideological power on important instances of societal construction. The educational system, as pointed out by Caitriona Beaumont in *Women, Citizenship and Catholicism in the Irish Free State, 1922-1948*, was largely controlled by the Church. Catholic girls were taught not only moral principles, but also how an ideal Irish woman must behave, the

places and activities she must avoid, and how to dress properly in order to prevent “indecent fashions” (566-567). In relation to health policies, abortion had been illegal in Ireland since the British 1867 Act and remained illegal in the Free State; the sale and import of contraceptives was to be prohibited in 1935. In 1929, the Censorship Publication Act banned any sort of information about abortion or contraception. Likewise, divorce had been outlawed since 1924 (O’Callaghan 129).

The cult of the Virgin Mary – and the ideal of motherhood, moral behavior and purity it represented – was seen as a role model that the “ideal” Irish woman must conform with. Considering that the excessive preoccupation with immorality was pretty much related to women’s body and sexuality – and women already had their sexual behavior regulated by social mores – it is not surprising that many female citizens would feel displaced in such stifling environment. O’Callaghan (125) highlights that the idealistic view imposed on women – related to the cult of the Virgin Mary, virginity and purity – caused a feeling of inadequacy and inferiority of those who did not fit that model and did not want to be seen as “unsexed” (125). Whilst privately women may have experienced guilt about their own sexuality, in the public domain this would “facilitate the legitimation of certain types of misogyny and contribute to the celebration of feminine self-sacrifice, subservience and silence” (O’Callaghan 125). Mary Ryan goes further and argues that “female desire presented a challenge to the concept of female morality and sexual purity” (94). There thus seems to be an agreement among scholars in relation to the extent of the Church’s influence on Free State policies.

Women’s concerns with the 1937 Constitution were not unfounded. If compared to the 1922 Constitution, changes in specific articles caused preoccupation and fear in relation to newly conquered rights, for instance, citizenship qualification and permission to vote – in articles 9 and 16, respectively. As a result of women’s outrage, groups like the National University Women Graduates’ Association, the Joint Committee of Women Societies and Social Workers, and the Irish Women Workers’ Union joined a campaign to seek an explanation from the government and protest against the document that would legally confine women’s citizenship merely to the functions of wife and mother (Beaumont 563-575). In general terms, women’s organizations fought to ensure that the Constitution was clear in terms of equality regardless of gender, a point that was quite obscure in various passages, arguing that the 1937 draft was “the clearest affirmation of women’s domestic duty” (Beaumont 574). The government denied that the 1937 draft Constitution offered any sort of risk for women’s rights, but that did not convince the organizations that had publicly questioned the content of the document. Ultimately, a few Articles were amended, including those that raised more discussion: 9 and 16. For Beaumont (576), by attaining these amendments, Irish women’s movements provided new possibilities and offered a positive ideal for women in Ireland.

Scholars have discussed the influence of Catholic ideology upon Irish people, and especially Irish women. The debate towards the prohibition of divorce and the government decision to stop importing and selling contraceptives, at the time

of the 1937 Constitution and onwards, renders explicit the direct interference of the state in the private lives of women, who did not have power over their own bodies and wills. David Pierce ironically declares that “Ireland was a Free State but, given censorship, emigration and no divorce, it was uncertain what exactly the adjective was describing” (177).

Since most of the population was devoutly Catholic, there was a widespread acceptance of Catholic beliefs, including the idea of women’s “natural” inclination for domesticity. However, the awareness that women’s conditions were determined by law was also increasing in this period, somewhat leading more people to discuss women’s rights (Beaumont 564). If Ireland was a “Free” State in any terms, certainly it was not so for women.

In a male-dominated society in which even the constitution constrained women’s roles and possibilities, it is not surprising that literature written by women would be relegated to second-level type of production within the Irish literary scenario. Due to this kind of dismissive attitude towards female writing, many excellent works remained unknown to the general audience and unremarked for quite a long time.

That being said, this paper aims at establishing a dialogue between the short story “Sarah,” written and published by Mary Lavin during the so-called Emergency period, and the corresponding critical attention given to it, especially relying on Donna L. Potts’s and Deirdre O’Byrne’s essays on the tale, in which they discuss the matter of agency in relation to the female protagonist. Moreover, Mary Ryan’s essay on women’s writing and sexuality in Ireland will be used to support and illustrate the idea that women had their sexuality constrained, mainly because of the restrictions imposed by the Church. Therefore, my main point is to argue that although Sarah’s life was conditioned by an extremely restrictive society for women, before and particularly in the Emergency period, her demeanor denotes a position of agency.

Mary Lavin can be placed in the category of writers whose works were relegated to a critical limbo for their supposed lack of nationalist content. Her works – as pointed out by Theresa Wray (237) – received sustained critical attention only after the 1960s. In 1943, she published *Tales from Bective Bridge*, her first collection, comprising ten short stories, although some of them had previously appeared in *The Dublin Magazine*. The collection approached themes that would be recurrent also in her works: loss, isolation, dislocation and death along with depictions of “Irish locations [that] provoke an unsettling dual sense of belonging and estrangement” (Wray 243). Rather than focusing directly on social and political issues, she portrayed the effects of such matters in people’s everyday lives, mainly dealing with social structures such as the Church and the State and their impact on family and community relationships; she depicted the lives of her characters with “extraordinary sympathy and empathy” (Wray 251).

If a critical attitude towards Lavin’s thematic choices is justified because of their supposed lack of political content, those critics may fail to notice that Lavin was from a different generation of writers, whose works were produced

when Ireland had already gone through its worst troubles, *i.e.* the Anglo-Irish War and the Civil War. Besides, her American background – she was born in Massachusetts and moved to Ireland as a child – allowed her to take a realistic and critical view of Ireland in her fiction (Harmon 11).

The stories in Lavin's debut volume look through the crude reality of Irish people within "a dominant, almost wholly Catholic, middle-class society in the decades after revolution," as Maurice Harmon has suggested (12). A likely reason for her social concerns to be stronger in her early stories is precisely because she lived through the Second World War period, the economic stagnation, and the intrusive control imposed by the Catholic Church over the life of the individual (Harmon 12-13). Notably, the short story "Sarah" deals with a woman's private life and choices albeit its background scenes carry a much broader message, giving the reader the possibility to construe the story with her/his own lenses, to think about what has been left unsaid, thus opening up a series of potential interpretations to the main character's unfortunate fate. One must therefore agree with Anne Fogarty: "Mary Lavin is a more overtly radical writer than has regularly been discerned" (52).

It would be, however, reckless to consider Lavin as an apolitical writer because of the methods chosen to depict Irish lives left voiceless for not being considered relevant to the social and political climate of the country. After all, how important was to talk about family issues when the country was going through a process to establish itself as a sovereign nation? Weren't the private lives exposed in Lavin's fiction also a crude exposition of Irish society's working mechanisms? As Theresa Wray has pointed out, "Lavin's fictions are in fact sensitively constructed to reflect her observations of twentieth-century Ireland and they respond to various external social moods" (250).

### **The Private Matters: Female Agency in "Sarah"**

At first glance, Sarah Murray, whose name gives title to Mary Lavin's short story, seems to be a woman at the mercy of her poor condition within a constrictive society in mid-century Ireland. Mother of three sons, all of whom born outside marriage, Sarah's situation worsens when she becomes pregnant for the fourth time, possibly as a result of sexual intercourse with Oliver Kedrigan, newly married to Kathleen.

Although "Sarah had a bit of a bad name" (Lavin 37) in town, the dwellers do not despise or offend her – at least not publicly. Their "defense" consists of saying that Sarah is unlucky for having grown with two "rough brothers" (37) and without the presence of a father. The extent to which the townspeople are aware of Sarah's brothers' – Pat and Joseph's – roughness towards her is left unclear, although Lavin provides information that may lead to the conclusion that Sarah is physically and psychologically abused by her brothers. For instance, when Pat – the eldest – decides to confront Sarah about her pregnancy and accuses her of sending a letter to the Kedrigans naming Oliver the father of the unborn child, he "pushed her

down . . . against the chair” (Lavin 42). When Sarah stands up to him saying – “What business is it of yours?” (42), trying to stay in her feet again, he “shouted . . . and pressed her back” (42). The use of force applied by Pat seems to be a reality in the Murrays’ house; Joseph’s silence and passivity with the situation turns him into an accomplice of Pat’s abusive conduct towards Sarah. Mary Ryan (97) highlights that there were very few laws in Ireland to protect women in the domestic sphere, and that is why so many cases have remained unreported. Ryan states that:

Domestic violence . . . was considered an issue to be discussed privately, and the silencing of female sexuality, which was often equated with “sin”, meant that single mothers and other women who were seen to flaunt their sexuality were ostracized for their supposedly “deviant” behaviour. Both Church and state maintained that women should hold a certain morality, particularly relating to areas of sexuality and reproduction. (93)

If women had their private lives legally controlled by the State, under the Church’s influence, it is not surprising that the ones who did not fit that model, like Sarah, would be ostracized, both in the private and public realms. Prior to the 1937 Constitution, which in many points restricted women’s rights, Irish legislations already complicated women’s education and access to means of contraception, noting that since 1929 any sort of information about abortion or contraception had been banned, and since 1935 the sales and import of contraceptives had been prohibited in the country.

The extent to which the State and the Church constrained women’s lives is indisputable, given the aforementioned facts. Considering that women were systematically subordinated, one could affirm that they did have their emancipatory potentials severely compromised due to such constructed social relations of power and hierarchies related to gender. McNay notes that “agency is commonly understood as the capacity of a person . . . to intervene in the world in a manner that is deemed, according to some criterion or another, to be independent or relatively autonomous” (40). She highlights, however, that its conceptualization must not be overlooked merely as a series of abstract capacities or potentials. A greater understanding of agency also encompasses the acknowledgement that people as agents have their interactions underpinned by societal constructions and relations of power, which are undeniably present in any situation, at any time (41). In this sense, one could say that the Murrays’ household works as a microcosm for a larger mechanism that is Irish society and its mindset. Joseph and Pat, as the representatives of society’s dominant norms and patriarchal standards, tyrannize over Sarah who – in many ways – is placed at the margins of such configuration for being a single mother in mid-century Ireland.

The reason why Pat and Joseph are so angry at Sarah’s fourth pregnancy, whilst they have apparently accepted the previous ones, is not clear. Both Deirdre O’Byrne and Donna L. Potts argue that the brothers may have accepted the first three children because they could be used as a source of free labor, whereas, in the fourth pregnancy, Sarah is not willing to take responsibility on her own, and has



supposedly sent an anonymous letter to Oliver. Whether the letter has been really written by Sarah, one is not sure. The fact is that Kathleen Kedrigan, in spite of Sarah's bad name, hires her because of her diligent work as a cleaning lady, while Kathleen herself is away to Dublin for medical reasons. Kathleen later intercepts the letter and hands it in to Sarah's brother, arousing his anger, and this eventually leads to Sarah's death. Until then, Pat and Joseph might have overlooked her unconformity to the social norms, and even disregarded her agency, blaming the country's "blackguards" (Lavin 39), in a reference to "the old Molloy or his like" (Lavin 43), who, unlike Oliver, are not married men, and would take the responsibility if "the need arose" (Lavin 43). However, they cannot put up with Sarah's possible involvement with a married man, since marriage and the family unit are sacred institutions within Irish society. Therefore, in agreement with O'Byrne (2), the issue is not Sarah's pregnancy itself, but her threat to the *status quo* and her daring to expose her sexual demeanor publicly, which renders the situation unbearable for her brothers.

One may affirm that, precisely because the ruling norms presented such huge barriers to women's agentic potentials, Sarah has no other means to find her own way to empowerment than subverting such idealistic and utopian views on women in her private life, which she manifests through her sexual freedom. Whilst the community seems to tolerate the fact that she has given birth to three children out of wedlock and praise her for her qualities as a cleaning lady and for her religiousness, their "charity was tempered with prudence and women with grown sons, and women not long married, took care not to hire her" (Lavin 38).

Sarah does not feel ashamed because of her pregnancies, nor seems willing to reveal the paternity of her first three children. Even when confronted by the priest in one of the previous pregnancies, "Sarah took care not to let him catch sight of the child till the whole thing was put to the back of his mind" (Lavin 40). Pat and Joseph, then, recall that in Sarah's last pregnancy the priest had said that "a Home was the only place for the like of her" (39). A "Home" is a clear reference to the Magdalene Laundries – houses maintained by the Catholic Church in which women who gave birth out of wedlock, for instance, were sent "to serve as slave labor, stripping them of their identities, subjecting them to forms of brutality that led to many unexplained and unreported deaths, and leaving them in unmarked graves" (Potts n.p.). Sarah has not been sent to a "Home" because her brothers need a woman in the house to do the housework and look after the children, at least until the boys can be sent to work themselves. Their attitude reinforces the idea that women's place should be confined to the domestic spheres, taking care of the house, the children and the men.

Sarah is, nonetheless, placed in a two-sided spectrum: a single mother whose sexual behavior shocks people and the tireless worker who finds no trouble in following the Holy Church's commandments. Deirdre O'Byrne argues that "by performing an outward show of traditional Irish womanhood, devotedly Catholic and domestically competent" (7), Sarah becomes somehow accepted by the community, and subverts the ruling sexual norms in her private life. However,

when her sexual behavior seems to be a threat to the brother's reputation by revealing that she is involved with a married man, Sarah "suffered the punishment of her era for women who demonstrated sexual agency" (Potts n.p.). Pat's anger towards Sarah is exemplified in the following dialogue:

Answer me. Is it true what it says in this letter?  
 How do I know what it says! And what if it is true? It's no business of yours.  
 I'll show you whose business it is! (Lavin 43)

Not accepting Sarah's resistance to his authority, Pat gets in the room in which Sarah slept with her children, collects some of her personal belongings and throws one by one out of the door, until he pulls Sarah herself by the hair, dragging her out of the house. The scene thoroughly represents how Sarah had been constantly abused by her brothers, not only psychologically but physically. Pat does not only invade her personal space just that one time, but does so repeatedly, which – as put by Potts – serves as a symbolic representation of how they have been violating "her private space, and by association, her, a little more intimately and brutally" (n.p.). Ultimately, he throws her out in the cold and rainy night, to be found in the morning "dead as a rat. And the child dead beside her" (Lavin 44).

For Donna Potts, Kathleen is as culpable as Pat and Joseph for Sarah's death. When Oliver – newly married to Kathleen and who has possibly had an affair with Sarah when she worked for them – mentions the anonymous letter and tells Kathleen that it is "an unjust accusation" (Lavin 41), she stands impassive and tells him to "take no notice" (42) if he is not to blame, and, in a quick move, she grasps the paper and throws it into the fireplace. However, we get to know, in one of the Murray brothers' dialogues, that Kathleen herself gave Pat the letter they all assumed was written by Sarah. The result of such intervention is already known. In addition, Potts declares that:

Kathleen Kedrigan has clearly internalized the patriarchal double standard for women, and believes Sarah, not her husband, should be punished for the sin of adultery. Although Sarah's death, instigated by community-minded Kathleen, represents a triumph for the community, it is the triumph of the social hierarchy and of patriarchy, at the expense of personal freedom and of women's agency. (n.p.)

Women like Sarah, who subvert social standards, are often categorized as "monsters" for not complying with the idea of passivity and for not accepting being treated as an object. These women, unlike the so-called "angels," need punishment for their transgression (Ryan 93). The differences between Sarah and Kathleen go from their nature to the roles they represent. While Kathleen is described as a "bleached out bloodless thing" (Lavin 39), Sarah had a "flux of healthy . . . blood in her face" (39); a mattress "slapped life" into Sarah's children, whilst Kathleen would go to the maternity in Dublin to give birth to her first



“long delayed” child. In her pregnancies, Sarah “worked even better than before and she sang at her work. She carried the child deep in her body and she boldly faced an abashed congregation at Mass on Sundays,” distinctly from Kathleen, who “didn’t go to Mass: the priest came to her. She was looking bad. By day she crept from chair to chair around the kitchen . . . She was self-conscious about her condition and her nerves were frayed” (41).

Despite Kathleen’s devilish attitude towards Sarah, since nobody, apart from the Murray brothers, knows that she has delivered the letter causing Sarah’s tragic end, she is still seen as the role model of woman and wife to society. In the end, her endeavor to maintain her image and her preoccupation to prove that she does have power over her husband lead her to seal another woman’s fate. In his study of Mary Lavin’s work, Richard Peterson recognizes Sarah’s potential for emancipation, but notes that the restrictive environment in which she is immersed ends up preventing her from achieving it fully: “Despite her natural goodness, she is destroyed by the moral righteousness of the ‘anemic and thin-boned’ Kathleen Kedrigan, the moral cowardice of Kathleen’s husband, Oliver, and the cruel insensitivity of her own brothers” (30). Peterson also highlights the intense social critique presented in “Sarah,” and the contrast between the main character’s positive ethos and the demands and constraints imposed on her by Irish society, which is – in fact – represented by the dwellers as a collective character in itself: “Sarah’s death, instigated by Kathleen, represents a triumph for the community, but it is the triumph of the unnatural over the natural, the perversely conventional over the independent-minded” (Peterson 30). Although some may insist on focusing on Sarah’s marginalization, she is not conditioned by rules or societal norms. Yet, in accordance with Potts (n.p.), Sarah does “represent female agency and empowerment within a patriarchal society.”

### **Concluding Remarks**

Although some critics have regarded Mary Lavin’s thematic choices as “too private” and blamed her for not raising nationalist issues in her fiction, her subject matter was not that common place, and by no means apolitical. In approaching the problems faced by Sarah as a single mother, Lavin called into question the extent of the Church’s power on the State and consequently on the lives of historically marginalized groups. Whilst religion ruled people’s lives, conditioning them to its relentless pattern, the ones, like Sarah, who in some way subverted such model, did so mostly privately, to a certain extent. Sarah, however, decided to call responsibility for an act that had not been her choice only. In not keeping her mouth shut, as expected, Sarah undermines the stereotype of the angelic woman – whose passivity and submission are the main attributes. In not accepting her brothers’ conduct towards her and in naming Oliver as the father of her fourth child, Sarah disrupts the ideal of womanhood so highly valued within her community.

Whereas Sarah is portrayed both as victim and transgressor of society's moral duties, Kathleen Kedrigan personifies the role of woman whose object-passive like characteristics serve both the community and her matrimony. By orchestrating Sarah's misfortune with her brothers, Kathleen ends up discharging Oliver from any responsibility he might have had – although she never discussed the matter with him properly – for the sake of their union and because of the need to prove “her legitimate power over her man” (Lavin 38).

Kathleen and Sarah operate in divergent universes within the plot. Lavin used physical descriptions of both to construe and emphasize their antithetical psychological and corporeal mechanisms. Kathleen acts in accordance with what is expected from a woman within a religious and male ruled society, whilst Sarah's misbehavior threatens to disrupt the social order, and so she is silenced, suffering the most radical punishment: death. Moreover, as the city in which the story takes place is unspecified, and the reader recognizes that it is a small town through the information provided, one may conclude that Lavin was making an inference to the mindset likely to be found in diverse places all over Ireland.

There is a range of possible interpretations for some of the issues in Mary Lavin's short story “Sarah.” In regard to Pat and Joseph's involvement in Sarah's pregnancies, Potts has suggested that one or both could be the father of one or more of her children. In addition, the origin of the letter naming Oliver the father of Sarah's child, the letter handed in to Pat, is debatable. It could be the first letter or a second one, written by Kathleen herself to incriminate Sarah. Yet one thing is unarguable: although Sarah ends up being driven underground for her unconformity with the ideal of angelic woman, she does demonstrate agency in boldly confronting the priest and her brothers, for not denying her nature and keeping her sexual freedom in spite of the retaliation she could suffer. In agreement with Donna Potts (n.p.), we conclude by affirming that “‘Sarah’ may be read as an effort to carve out a space for Irish women's history.”

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