Writing Ireland

Lecture 11: The Irish Short Story

The flawed mirror through which literary critics, especially, have usually approached the novel in Ireland is an invention of the 1940s and 1950s. Frank O'Connor and Seán O'Fáolain, in keeping with with the notion that the novel was a harbinger of order and stability and mesmerised by the thought of a 'grand tradition', argued that the novel form was best suited to 'made' societies and cultures. Therefore, the argument goes, the prose form best suited to articulating the Irish experience of becoming, along with the provisional nature of modern Irish culture, is the short story. The short story's obvious links to orality also suggest its distinct receptiveness to rendering an Irish reality. (Hand 2011, 3)

Cf. Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (1965);
Seán O'Fáolain, *The Short Story* (1948, 2nd ed. 1972) and 'Fifty Years of Irish Writing'. In: *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 51: 201 (Spring, 1962), 93-105.

'The Hour of Death'

(edited and translated from the Irish by Sean O'Sullivan)

The old people used to say that in the olden times everybody knew the exact time when he would die.

There was a man who knew that he would die in autumn. He planted his crops the previous spring, but instead of building a fine fence around them, all he did was to plant a makeshift hedge of a few rushes and ferns to guard the crops. It so happened that God (praise and glory to Him!) sent an angel down on earth to find out how the people were getting on. The angel came to this man and asked him what he was doing. The man told him.

'And why haven't you a better fence than that makeshift to protect your crops?'

'It will do me,' said the man, 'until I have the crops stored. Let those who succeed me look after their own fences. I'll die this autumn.'

The angel returned and told the Almighty what had happened. And from that day on, people lost foreknowledge of the hour of death.

(Trevor 1989, 1)

Two Types of Folk Narrative:

Conte	**vs.**	**Legende**
international provenance		regional, homely
little variation, fixed form		infinitely variable
handed down, tradition		personal, witnessed
V		
Ireland: scéal		
scéalai (storyteller, poet; always male) relating sean-sgéal		seanchai (historian, storyteller; male of female) relating local lore, family genealogies, fairy and ghost stories

Declan Kiberd, "Story-Telling: The Gaelic Tradition"
(Rafroidi & Brown 1979, 13-25)

Perhaps the finest account of the Gaelic story-teller and his art was given by Seán Mac Giollarnáth [... in 1934]. As a rule, stories were told at night around the winter fire from the end of the harvest until the middle of March. [...] Audiences were critical and not slow to correct a teller who stumbled and made a mistake. They loved to hear a familiar story again and again, having a deep admiration for the skill with which it was told. They became deeply involved in the plot, murmuring with apprehension or sighing with fear as the story progressed. [...]
A most moving account of a Kerry teller in his eighties was given by Tadhhg O Murchú in the 1930s:

> His piercing eyes are on my face, his lips are trembling, as, immersed in his story, and forgetful of all else, he puts his very soul into the telling. Obviously much affected by his narrative, he uses a great deal of gesticulation, and by the movement of his body, hand, and head, tries to convey hate and anger, fear and humour, like an actor in a play. (16f.)

Influential Collections in the 19th Century:

1809-12	Maria Edgeworth, *Tales of Fashionable Life*
1830-34	William Carleton, *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* I + II, *Tales of Ireland*
1851	Sheridan Le Fanu, *Ghost Stories and Tales of Mystery*

Edgar Allan Poe, Review of Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales* (1842)

Were I called upon […] to designate that class of composition which, next to the poem […] should best fulfil the demands and serve the purposes of ambitious genius, should offer it the most advantageous field of exertion, and afford it the fairest opportunity of display, I should speak at once of the brief prose tale. […] The ordinary novel is objectionable, from its length, for reasons analogous to those which render length objectionable in the poem. As the novel cannot be read in one sitting, it cannot avail itself of the immense benefit of *totality.* Worldly interests, intervening during the pauses of perusal, modify, counteract and annul the impressions intended. But simple cessation in reading would […] be sufficient to destroy the true unity […]

A skilful artist has constructed a tale. He has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents, but having deliberately conceived a certain *single effect* to be wrought, he then invents such incidents, he then combines such events, and discusses them in such tone as may best serve him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very first sentence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then in his very first step has he committed a blunder. In the whole composition there should be no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction. The idea of the tale, its thesis, has been presented unblemished, because undisturbed – an end absolutely demanded, yet, in the novel, altogether unobtainable.

Gerald Griffin, 'The Brown Man'

(in: *Holland-Tide; or Munster Popular Tales* 1827; Trevor 1989, 73-77)

The common Irish expression of 'the seven devils' does not, it would appear, owe its origin to the supernatural influences ascribed to that numeral, from its frequent association with the greatest and most solemn occasions of theological history. If one were disposed to be fancifully metaphysical upon the subject, it might not be amiss to compare credulity to a sort of mental prism, by which the great volume of the light of speculative superstition is refracted in a manner precisely similar to that of the material, every day sun, the great refractor thus showing only *blue* devils to the inhabitants of the great city of London, *orange* and *green* devils to the inhabitants of the sister (or rather step-daughter), island, and so forward until the seven component hues are made out, through the other nations of the earth. But what has this to do with the story? In order to answer that question, the story must be told.

In a lonely cabin, in lonely den, on the shores of a lonely lough, in one of the most lonesome districts of West Munster, lives a lone woman named Guare. She had a beautiful girl, a daughter named Nora [...]
It was a very fine morning in those parts, for it was only snowing and hailing, when Nora and her mother were sitting at the door of their little cottage, and laying out plans for the next day's dinner. On a sudden, a strange horseman rode up to the door. He was strange in more ways than one. He was dressed in brown, his hair was brown, his eyes were brown, his boots were brown, he rode a brown horse, and he was followed by a brown dog.
'I'm come to marry you, Nora Guare,' said the Brown Man.
'Ax my mother fusht, if you plaise, sir,' said Nora, dropping him a curtsy.
'You'll not refuse, ma'am;' said the Brown Man to the old mother, 'I have money enough, and I'll make your daughter a lady, with servants at her call, and all manner of fine things about her.' And so saying, he flung a purse of gold into the widow's lap.
'Why then the heavens speed you and her together, take her away with you, and make much of her,' said the old mother, quite bewildered with all the money.
'Agh, agh,' said the Brown Man, as he placed her on his horse behind him without more ado. 'Are you ready now?'
'I am!' said the bride.

[...]

'Ah, you are not my mother!' shrieked the miserable girl, and the Brown Man flung off his disguise, and stood before her, Grinning worse than a blacksmith's face through a horse-collar. He just looked at her one moment, and then darted his long fingers into her bosom, from which the red blood spouted in so many streams. She was very soon out of all pain, and a merry supper the horse, the dog, and the Brown Man had that night, by all accounts.

The Beginnings of the Modern Irish Short Story: George Moore, *The Untilled Field* (1903)

- stories of rural life, focused on clerical interference in the daily lives of the Irish peasantry and on emigration
- originally intended for translation and 'original' publication in Irish in order to provide a model for literary practice in the context of the Celtic Revival (published in a parallel-text edition by the Gaelic League as *An-tÚr-Ghort* in 1902), then revised for publication in English in 1903
- varied, but basically realistic narrative technique (influenced by Turgenev)
- anticipating Joyce's *Dubliners* in its emphasis on everyday life

Cf. John Cronin in Rafroidi/Brown 1979, 113-125 and
James F. Carens, "In Quest of a New Impulse: George Moore's *The Untilled Field* and James Joyce's *Dubliners.*" In: Kilroy 1984, 45-93.

Stories in Regan 2004:

James Joyce, “A Painful Case” (1904, publ. in *Dubliners* 1914)
Seán O’Faoláin, “Lilliput” (1926, publ. in *Midsummer Night Madness and Other Stories* 1932)
Liam O’Flaherty, “The Mountain Tavern” (1929)
Frank O’Connor, “The Majesty of the Law” (1935, first publ. in *The Fortnightly Review* and then included in *Bones of Contention* 1936)

Influential Writers and Collections in the 20th Century:

1914 James Joyce, *Dubliners*
1923 Elisabeth Bowen, *Encounters*
1924 Liam O’Flaherty, *Spring Sowing*
1931 Frank O’Connor, *Guests of the Nation*
1932 Sean O’Faolain, *Midsummer Night Madness*
1934 Samuel Beckett, *More Pricks than Kicks*
1952 *The Stories of Frank O’Connor*
1958 *The Stories of Sean O’Faolain*
1981 *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen*
…

Kevin Barry, *There Are Little Kingdoms.* Dublin: The Stinging Fly Press, 2007.

- Rooney Prize for Irish Literature and named Book of the Year by the *Irish Times, Sunday Tribune* and *Metro*
- Publisher’s blurb: Fast girls cool their heels on a slow night in a small town; a bewildered man steps off a country bus in search of his identity; lonesome hillwalkers take to the high reaches in hope of a saving embrace. These are just three of the scenarios played out in Kevin Barry’s wonderfully imagined and riotously entertaining short stories. Throw in a lust-deranged poultry farmer, a gigantic taxi driver stricken with chilling visions, a jaded air hostess and a stressed-out genie, and you have stunning, provocative and richly comic collection from a writer of unique gifts.

Kevin Barry, *Dark Lies the Island.* London: Jonathan Cape, 2012.

***Guardian* review by Chris Power (27 April 2012):**
https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/apr/27/dark-lies-island-kevin-barry-review

The Irish writer Kevin Barry's best short stories are like a spade to the face. Whether describing emergencies in which instinct shoulders aside intellect (a beleaguered hotelier facing floodwaters; a drug dealer imprisoned by highly sexed pagans) or charting quieter moments of loss (a bungled kiss at the fag-end of a party; the thwarted emotions of a group of real ale enthusiasts) there is a vividness to his writing that plants you immediately at its heart.
[...]
In "Fjord of Killary", the highlight of this excellent collection, a blocked poet is beginning to grasp how unwise it was to buy an old hotel in North Galway. The hotel has 23 bedrooms "and listed westward. Set a can of peas on the floor of just about any bedroom and it would roll slowly in the direction of the gibbering Atlantic". Both "gibbering" and the slow, doomed roll of the peas precisely capture the beset psychology of the narrator, whose psychic distress will shortly be physically mirrored by a flash flood. This story, where every element works in unison, is the most successfulblend of Barry's muscular comic gift with his attempts to portray sincere emotional shifts: the epiphanies of James Joyce's *Dubliners*, those instances where a whole life is apprehended, and sometimes transfigured, in a flash of realisation.

Read 'Fjord of Killary' at
https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/02/01/fjord-of-killary

Watch (and listen to) Kevin Barry read the story at
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mh6STw-_FYg
(0:50-15.50)

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Regan, Stephen, ed., *Irish Writing: An Anthology of Irish Literature in English 1789-1939.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004.
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Criticism:

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