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Narratives of Internal Exile in Mary Lavin's Short Stories

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ABSTRACT

Paul Tabori's definition of exile and Michael Seidel's discussion of the "exilic mind" are the points of departure for this study of short stories by Mary Lavin. The stories deal with internal exile, meaning marginalisation within the local community or native country, due to that individual will is incompatible with pressure to conform to unwritten rules of society. The narratives of the stories strongly suggest that these characters are subversive according to the dominant ethos of the restrictive Catholic Ireland that Lavin writes about. Women who do not fulfil their enforced social role of wife or mother and the restrictions of young widows feature in several stories. But some stories show that internal exile also affects men, leaving them in a social vacuum. The novella "The Becker Wives" will be discussed at length as an explicit and striking narrative of internal exile on an individual and a social level.

KEYWORDS: Mary Lavin; internal exile; exilic mind; bird as exilic emblem; subversion; status quo; widows; ambiguity; escape; community.

Mary Lavin was born in Massachusetts, in 1912. At the age of ten she went with her returning family to Ireland and lived there for the rest of her life, mainly on a farm in Bective, Co. Meath. She was widowed in her early forties but later remarried. Her production includes books for children and two novels, The *House in Clewe Street* (1945) and *Mary O'Grady* (1950). Lavin was, however, primarily a writer of short stories. She admired in particular Russian exponents

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of the form, for example Turgenev. She has been compared to her fellow-Irish writer Sean O'Faolain. One of her best-known stories is the novella *The Becker Wives* (1946). Her collections include *Tules from Bective Bridge* (1942), *The Long Ago* (1944), *A Single Lady* (1951), *The Patriot Son* (1956), *A Likely Story* (1957), *The Great Wave* (1962), *A Memory and Other Stories* (1972) and *A Family Likeness* (1985). Mary Lavin died in 1996.

Mary Lavin's stories often deal with characters marginalised in their own community for different reasons. Characters are due to circumstances often either prevented from 'jumping' to a life outside their original rural environment or, on the other hand, forced or persuaded to take the leap into the unknown world of Dublin or abroad. Those who stay in Ireland are unable to develop their lives in a personally satisfying direction and are caught in an existence that may look satisfactory on the outside, but hides discontent that is often unleashed by traumatic events, such as death, or reminders of lost opportunities. The constrictive religious and social morality of Ireland in the stories causes suffering and turns those forced to live by these conventions into internal exiles. This essay will discuss examples of internal exiles in Mary Lavin's short fiction. But first it is essential to define the focal point of view of my argument: the concept of exile.

The word exile originates in the Latin, meaning to 'to jump', but exile in a modern sense has multiple meanings and can refer to both reality and desire. Paul Tabori refers to exile as ranging between expulsion from the native country and exclusion from community in a more general sense, for example within one's own country, and being forced to live in a remote location, such as a craggy island (Tabori, 1972: 23). In other words, a person may regard him/herself as an exile due to alienation from the community within which she or he lives, even within his/her own country. Indeed, individuals have been deliberately ostracised from their native community without being forced to go abroad. This is unofficial, internal, exile: when one stays but still does not feel completely part of the home community. Many of Mary Lavin's characters fall into this category of exiles.

Michael Seidel discusses the concept of the "exilic mind" in a literary context, based on illusion, yet deriving from experience. Exile, thus, evolves from the familiar but often strives towards unexplored imagined territory (Seidel, 1986: 2). The urge to wander, and then to return home. only to want to wander again is carried over into many literary characters of which Odysseus, of course, is the classic example. Also Lavin's stories present characters of this ambivalent nature.

It cannot be ignored that any act that renders a person to be regarded as an exile, internal or external, is subversive. An exile does not follow the beaten track of life, but searches for the route that best suits his or her individual aspirations and desires. In an intellectually narrow-minded and intolerant environment this behaviour is often regarded as disruptive and a threat to the *status quo*. Exiles are in fact battling to impose individual will against enforced collective consensus. lnternal exiles, who for various reasons stay in their provincial place, have to contend with almost being regarded as a criminal or as mentally unstable.

The rural Irish settings in Mary Lavin's fiction are mostly either the Midlands or Co.

Meath, and are often contrasted with Dublin, the most immediate metropolis, where you get a good education or a good doctor. Dublin can also provide momentary escape into anonymity and amorous adventure, away from the forbidding eyes of your local community. But for those who live in Dublin the city can be equally restrictive as a small provincial town, isolating like a prison, and a disappointment for failed hopes and aspirations for people who have moved there from the countryside, in search of a more satisfying life. The literary exilic wanderlust is dominant in the nature of several of Lavin's ambivalent characters.

The morally and socially restrictive life depicted in Mary Lavin's short stories is mainly due to the pressure of maintaining appearances, and affects both men and women. In this microcosm minor incidents are often made into major events in an otherwise uneventful existence. Lavin's stories consistently focus on individuals and theirpersonal situation, by which she makes subtle and indirect comments on life in Ireland. Her stories do not make overt political statements. Instead any critique is delivered through portrayal of characters and their lives. Several stories reveal that life in rural communities may often hide personal tragedies. This is emphasised by Lavin's narrative style, stressing characterisation, turn of personal events and social milieu. As Zack Bowen points out in his monograph on Lavin, the motifs of her stories are often linked to people, settings and circumstances in her own life: her daughters, her early widowhood and people she knew (Bowen, 1975: 21). In her writing Lavin takes on the role of a distant observer, yet looking from within; she is a commentator on different kinds of social exile in Ireland, affecting mostly women, although she is not averse to describing men in similar situations. Her stories often explore the lives of women from diverse social backgrounds, living under different conditions in Ireland.

One category of women that feature repeatedly in Lavin's stories is widows, one parallel to her own experience. These female characters are in different ways trying to cope with a situation where their social status has been reduced. These women are not expected to look for a new man, especially not if they have children, as they are then considered to have fulfilled their purpose in life as mothers. In other words, widows are to follow the official ethos that demands a denial of sexual desire for pleasure and comfort, because procreation is the only reason for sex in the morally restrictive Ireland that Lavin writes about. As the young widow in the story "A Tragedy" realises, there is no escape from the alienating life that makes her an internal exile, living with her sister and brother-in-law like an old dependent relative without an independent life. As a woman she has no identity apart from being a widow. Another young widow, in the story "Happiness", must more explicitly come to terms with the fact that widowhood has delivered her into a permanent state of social isolation. Her defence mechanism against this desperate situation is keeping up appearances and the belief that her life is, nevertheless, happy. In the stories "The Cuckoo-Spit" and "In a Café" widowhood is most explicitly implied to be a claustrophobic cell, where women have to restrain their desires, lock up sexuality and throw away the key.

In "The Cuckoo-Spit" Vera, a middle-aged widow of a well-respected politician meets

Fergus, a younger man. He teases her by suggesting that on their first meeting she had been "tempted to go further" (Lavin, 1970: 104). Despite their affinity for each other, they prevent their relationship from developing beyond accepted moral boundaries; the cuckoo-spit is at work as they protect themselves from amorous adventure by raising obstacles. At one point Fergus asks Vera: "isn't everything outside our experience until it comes within it?" (Lavin 1970: 118). By their actions the pair refuse to let their experience take hold within them. Neither of them -for different reasons- are willing to 'jump' outside acceptable morality to reach within themselves to find that knowledge of intimate involvement. To apply Seidel's argument of the "exilic mind" they have wandered but retumed home, only to want to leave again.

Mary, the young widow in the story "In a Café" turns her trips to Dublin -away from her country home- into moments of imagined possibilities of escape and new love. Her brief meeting with a foreign painter is such a moment. The stranger represents the outside, beyond the boundaries of domestic constraints. Although Mary restrains herself from jumping at his invitation she has at least admitted to herself a need to fill the emotional void left by her husband's death. Like Vera in "The Cuckoo Spit" Mary will not give in to sexual desire. Mary's trips to Dublin are also Odyssean voyages: the traveller will set out on repeated unsatisfactory trips, only to return home and plan the next excursion. The in-built protection against rocking the moral norm is too strong to overcome.

Lavin also deals with single women and their way of coping in an environment where a woman has no definite role to play unless she marries or is strong enough to carve out a life on her own. One of Lavin's best known stories, "A Single Lady", encapsulates the fate of lost opportunities for Isabel, the "single lady" in the story. At forty lsabel knows that she will never marry but continue life in this, for a woman, socially unacceptable state. She had gone to university but returned to the family home, which she now shares with her widowed father, a man who has seen better days. Their prosperity, initially based on her mother's assets, has dwindled. The lack of servants in their house and the poor state of shoes and clothes are clear evidence of the decay.

The narrative strongly purports that Isabel is not singularly a victim, but in addition suggests that she has not explored her rare opportunities as an educated lrish woman. Isabel likes to think of herself as the one who has made sacrifices but now has been let down by her father. She had seemingly given up an independent life to look after him due to social pressure rather than choice, but there is also a subtle implication that her decision to return had not been entirely involuntary. Returning home had also been a way for her to escape the outside world and retaining a sense of security and social status, as the daughter from a prosperous family. Isabel had tried to jump, to leave the nest, but pulled back and came back to her family home. But the family's social decline and her spinsterhood have now turned to bittemess. Yet, she has retained aloofness in her attitude towards the outside world.

Isabel's interior voice rules that living in an anti-intellectual environment makes her what I call an internal exile. In fact, her family's loss of social status is what she deplores the most.

Nevertheless, until now she has managed to keep up social appearances -to herself at least- by having sustained a sense of authority in the house. But her position has recently changed as the live-in servant girl, Annie Bowles, has won her father's attention. These changed circumstances now alienate lsabel from her home and from her father; she is losing the only social role for her to play, as the woman of the house in her farnily home. Also, because of her lack of experience of an intimate relationship with aman, Isabel is jealous of her father's new friendship, which she can only see as sexually sordid. Her contempt for their liaison is encouraged by the fact that the understanding between the two that Isabel observes is warmer than the "distant" and "cool manner" she had witnessed in her father towards herself and her mother. She distances herself socially from Annie Bowles most strongly by referring to her as "the creature", echoing the name of the man-made social outcast in *Frankenstein*. To Isabel Annie is as frightening and threatening as Shelley's character because she represents what lsabel has sheltered from, crude and basic life, despite the fact that it has closed in on her as the family's prosperity has declined.

The narrative clearly suggests that Isabel's father is also an internal exile. He had married above his social status and with the death of his wife his acquired social position has been undermined. Nevertheless, for many years he has consciously, albeit reluctantly, exiled himself from his original social milieu. His initial objection to allowing the servant to move into the house shows his reluctance to openly admit his confusion about his social belonging. His social epic voyage has resulted in a return to familiar territory, personified by Annie. His attraction to her symbolises his explicit return to his original social environrnent, where he is in actual fact most comfortable. The narrative balances the points of view that both daughter and father have had to deal with exilic situations; it concludes that Isabel's lack of compassion and emotional paralysis is to be pitied, while the father's newly accepted sense of social place, confirmed by his relationship with Annie, is not condemned, underlining that both men and women are victims of social pressure.

Lavin's stories suggest that not much is needed to be considered subversive and, in effect, become an internal exile in a small town or a provincial city. Even an urge for momentary escape from that environment often causes an unofficial indictment by people who reject those who do not comply with the unwritten rules of conduct in the community. The story "My Molly" demonstrates that there is a fine line between being different and being considered subversive -threatening to the *status quo*- and cornpared to a dangerous criminal. The narrator of the opening of the story, Molly's husband, shows his own prejudice in this respect as he gives an affectionate account of his wife and refers positively about her characteristics that he regards as negative in any other woman. He compares her to a bird. a recurring emblem of individuality and free-spirited female characters in Lavin's stories. Being the mother of five children has puta stop to Molly's visits to Dublin from the small town, but unknown to her husband, she still holds these yearnings. She still "badly needs a bit of change" (Lavin, 1987: 218). Molly seizes the opportunity for a trip to Dublin when the police decide to go there to look for old Sam, another outsider, who has disappeared.

Molly and Sarn share a desire for space and escape, underlined by birds flying over their heads when they are talking together. They are both intemal exiles; she has recently moved to the town and he repeatedly wants to stray away frorn the claustrophobic small cornrnunity, which is what he has done in the past. Other inhabitants there cannot cornprehend that anybody would want to leave voluntarily. The interest of the police ernphasises the suggestion of a criminal act of subversion in leaving your local cornrnunity. lt is also considered abnorrnal behaviour and a rnark of insanity. Therefore sornebody like Sam is judged as guilty in the eyes of the law on several accounts. Molly, on the other hand, rnanages to curtail her desire for freedorn and consequently is not judged on that issue.

The search party going to Dublin in a srnall car represents a rniniature Ireland and the passengers represent different groups in the country. The policernen, one off-duty, are the State, busybodies who are willing to exclude anybody frorn society who shows the slightest sign of not conforming, evento unwritten laws. Miss Muggins takes the name of a fool, but as the sister of the local TD, she represents the new political elite. They have clairned their new privileged role only on the rnerit of their relationship to those who were on the winning side in the scrarnble for power after independence. The Captain is a rnernber of the rernnants of the deposed big-house gentry. His alliance with Sarn, frorn whorn the Captain borrows money, confirrns his status as an internal exile in post-colonial Ireland. Molly is the only one in the car without a defined place of social belonging, which is enough to make her an interna1 exile in a provincial society; she cannot be pinned down.

Molly's shopping for the farnily in Dublin is out of duty, partially brought about by her husband's protests about her joining the search party to Dublin. Her shopping is also a cornprornise between her 'duty' according to the norm and her individual will. Her latent urge for escape draws her to Dun Laoghaire, the docking area of the rnail boat to Britain, a potent syrnbol of exile from provincial Irish life. When Molly finds Sarn there their exilic minds are united in mutual understanding. Watching the mail boat, they wish in their dreams to jump to a different life far away. Rut in reality they have to retreat to horne and hold their fort against intolerance against those who do not want to be irnprisoned by restrictions of the norm.

In the story "Loving Mernory", restrictive issues of rnorality leading to exile within the comrnunity are explored. The supposedly perpetua1 bachelor Matthias Grimes surprised the villagers by bringing a bride, Alicia, back to his small town frorn Lisdoonvarna, the capital of matchmaking in Ireland. Alicia had also been presurned to rernain single and was to have been shipped off to America on the day they rnarried. Frorn the beginning of their rnarried life the couple created their own exilic world of marital harmony. The narrative stresses that the neighbours objected to the couple's showing of affection, "for all the world as if they were on a balcony in some ltalian resort" (Lavin, 1987: 271). Also after they have children Matthias and Alicia rernained a close couple, with a life of their own, even protected frorn their children, who are called love children by the disapproving villagers, thinking that intirnacy was for sornewhere else, not in your own comrnunity.

Because Alicia is from elsewhere, she is the vilified of the two. She is compared to a small bird, the emblem of flightiness and non-commitment, and as a woman in a tower, signifying that she is perceived as different, aloof and alien. Her elaborate dresses add to the locals' image of her as apart from them. After Alicia's death the women in the village allude to her as a threatening ghost. The threat to the norm that Alicia had posed in life continues in death. What is unfamiliar is seen as strange and therefore dangerous to the *status quo*, the ideal state of narrow-minded provinciality.

Provinciality engulfs country towns but also provides cover to escape the restrictive life to Dublin, which from a distance is deemed as a preferable option to staying in a small community. For those living in the country, Dublin symbolises freedom from internal exile, but for those living there, life in the city is just as pressurised as for those living in the country. This condition and the ambiguous relationship to Ireland and to home are central themes in several of Lavin's stories.

The railway had once carried away Lally, the protagonist in "The Will", from her hometown to Dublin. Her move had been an escape to be able to marry the man of her choice, against her mother's will. Her family regarded him as a social disgrace, and they had been proven right in that Lally has had a hard life in the city. The title of the story, however, refers not only to the legal document which expresses a dead mother's last wish to disinherit one of her daughters, Lally, but also includes those, like her, who show individual will. As a widow she has now returned for her mother's funeral, only to find that the pressure to conform to appearances of respectability is still put on her by her siblings.

Despite her initial quest for freedom, Lally has through her hardship in the city reached the conclusion that she has not been liberated. Instead, urban life has speeded up weariness and she has aged more than her sisters and brother who have remained close to home. With hindsight, for Lally returning to the city from the town no longer holds the imagination of a better and brighter life away from familiar territory. What had many years before pulled her away had proved to be an illusion. She concludes that, "Life was just the same in the town, in the city, and in the twisty countryside. Life was the same in the darkness and the light.... You were yourself always, no matter where you went or what you did" (Lavin, 1970: 140). In other words. the city has not improved or changed her life. Her fear of God for her dead mother's soul shows that despite the fact that she did leave home physically, her mind has not freed itself from the sense of guilt she feels for trying to grasp what proved non-existent, namely change.

The fact that you cannot escape yourself and doubts about home anywhere, and maybe even less so in Dublin, is also at the centre of attention in the story "At Sallygap". To Manny Ryan, the main character, several places represent escape: Wicklow, Dun Laoghaire, Holyhead, London and Paris. But Dublin, where he keeps a shop with his wife Annie, suggests imprisonment. On a trip to the Wicklow Mountains, outside Dublin, he sees the mail boat to Britain pulling out to sea. Seeing the ship at a distance, away from home, reminds him of his failure to jump, when as a young musician he had chosen not to go with a band to try his luck

in Paris. Instead, because he was persuaded by his future wife to stay behind, his emotional life has from then on been paralysed. At that point he turned his back on exile, what would have been a subversive action, and rejected individual will. His act of self-denial is symbolically illustrated by the description of when his forgotten fiddle was smashed against the quay when a friend threw it to him from the ship that would have taken him away from Ireland, into external exile.

His married life has been a dull routine without passion. In Wicklow, outside Dublin, he can face the fact that in his dingy city-home and shop "he was imprisoned for life" (Lavin, 1987: 32). Yet, Manny had been sucked back into the false security of staying in his native country, afraid to jump. His passive existence has smothered his urge to go abroad, although he encourages young people to leave Ireland. He is resigned to his situation to the degree that he even convinces himself that he is glad that he had not gone to Paris, and is now left with a sentimental attachment to the Irish countryside. Yet he stands out from the locals in the country pub because he is wearing a bowler hat, a city emblem. But Dublin, his adopted hometown and once his haven of freedom, away from a rural native place, has not fulfilled expectation, and he still momentarily thinks of Pans asan escape to freedom. He is alienated from both Irish city-life and rural community, an internal exile. He still momentarily imagines wandering away from his pitiful existence, only to be pulled back to his "prison".

A twist in the story occurs when Manny retums home and the narrative switches to Annie's point of view. Dueto the lack of communication between the two his wife, unknowingly to him, is also discontented in her marriage. She. however ironically, identifies that her husband had "giv[en] up his own freedom" (Lavin, 1987: 36) to marry her. Still, what she claims is lacking in his character, more emotion and temperament, had been quenched when she persuaded him to stay with her. Marriage had been her intended escape route in pursuit of a better personal life, but has instead proved to be a dull existence also for her. She had jumped to an imaginary idea of marriage that has not been fulfilled. Husband and wife are trapped in a static conventional way of life, which is dissatisfactory for both, as they have become emotionally exiled from each other.

The constraint of social convention and its drastic psychological consequences based on Victorian values are benchmarks for propriety in Lavin's intricate novella "The Becker Wives". The story is set in Dublin at an unspecified time, but in the earlier part of the twentieth century rather than at the time when it was written. The Beckers are prosperous com merchants and believe in what today is called family values. They produce numerous babies with predictable regularity, but no family member has the courage to grow as a human being; instead they conform to the family norm. Their conformity is underlined by the fact that the new Becker wives soon start to resemble each other. The new Becker women have assimilated to the Becker life style, extending to a preference for old furniture instead of new, to compensate for the fact that their money is relatively new and made through commerce, rather than inherited through generations of wealth.

The narrative of the story reflects the constraints of the Beckers, who neither succeed at

giving an air of "respectability" nor manage to safeguard a social position in established Dublin society. Their isolation in the city is emphasised in several ways. For example, the omniscient narrator observes that during an evening out, the Beckers "were the only people in the whole restaurant who were totally inconspicuous" (Lavin, 1987: 306). They only socialise within the family, and due to their isolation the Beckers have married partners they have found either through business or daily routines. The family does not have strong tiesto the city in which they live; the narrative makes no references to place names in Dublin. The mentioning of the Shelbourne hotel is the only way the story can be linked to Dublin, denoting that the Beckers go about their business in a social vacuum and lack of belonging to place. Their alienation is further stressed by the fact that their surname is foreign and that most of them have strongly Anglo-Irish first names. The Beckers are social exiles from other affluent people and are not highly regarded in society, because of their lack of ancestral pedigree. Instead of being distinguished members of established society they are internal exiles.

The Beckers' superficial lives are carefully calculated, a family trait inherited from their parents, to achieve respectability in established society, and echoes the Victorian values by which the society in which they live is ruled. The choice of wives for the siblings had been made with particular attention given to their "suitability for marriage and child-bearing" (Lavin, 1987: 299). One important role for the Becker wives is to follow in the footsteps of their matriarchal mother and mother-in-law, who only lived for the prosperity of her family. The fact that the Becker children, four sons and one daughter, were brought up by their father to believe that "marriage represented safety and security" (Lavin, 1987: 300) stresses that the events unfolded in the story undermine that foundation upon which the Beckers have been brought up to rely. They now believe these safeguards to be the most important components for a successful albeit uneventful life. It is inconceivable to them that a member of their family could be a poor judge in choosing a spouse who would not adjust to what the family requires of all its members, to sustain qualities to avoid upheaval in their ordinary lives of acquired bourgeois routines.

Theobald is the sibling who shows enhanced concern about the Beckers' social insignificance and tries to iniagine that his family is held in higher social esteem than is the case. He is conscious of class and prefers the Beckers to be noticed by others rather than the reverse. He lacks emotion and sees himself as apart and aloof from his brothers and sister, especially in their choice of partners. He objects to the fact that three of them have married socially beneath them. When his social notions become more exaggerated and explicit his attitude alienates him from the rest of his family. The majority of the Beckers have inadvertently surrendered to their peripheral social position, but their youngest brother has not accepted this form of exile from established society. The narrative accusingly points out that he scorns his family and in-laws for their "ordinariness and mediocrity" while he "nurtured strange notions of pride and ambition", to which "had been added intellectual snobbery and professional stuffiness" (Lavin, 1987: 304-5). The narrative voice severely condemns Theobald for having acquired ideas of his own grandeur compared with his family. Ironically Theobald's choice of bride, Flora, proves to be

socially the most disastrous match of all among the Beckers. His choice is based on trying to bring social respectability and cultural sophistication into his own clan by introducing a woman of various artistic talents and from an "old family".

Even before Flora's first appearance there is, however, a premonition of chaos and the unleashing of a force the Beckers will be unable to control. During the evening several casual references to madness anticipate the arrival of the mentally disturbed Flora, a bird in a gilded cage, who proves to have obsessions that are also aimed to gain social acceptance, albeit from a different perspective than the Beckers. The premonition of ensuing disaster is implied in the narrative's early mentioning of Flora in the past tense; she will in the near future only be an unsettling memory to them.

Flora is foreseen to be different from the rest of the Becker wives. While they are stout, one of them correctly imagines Flora as a "a little creature, volatile as a lark, a summer warbler, a creature so light and airy that it hardly rested on the ground at all" (Lavin, 1987: 323). Her future husband refers to Flora as a light an eater as a bird. Her eating habits are in stark contrast with the indulgence of the Beckers, whose ludicrous consumption during family dinners the narrative ironically refers to as "a race". Flora's first introduction to the Beckers takes place during one of these family gatherings; her entrance with Theobald is as impromptu as his brother Samuel's introduction on the same occasion of his future wife. Honoria, is formal and conventional.

During Flora's first meeting with her future in-laws she stages a trick. She imagines taking photographs of them all, a projection of Flora's perceived ideal of respectability personified by the Beckers. While the imagined photography session brings momentary stability to Flora it unsettles the Beckers; at the same time, and if only fleetingly, it makes them see themselves as they really are according to the narrative, "unnatural ... rigid" and "ridiculous" (Lavin, 1987: 331), yet willing to laugh at their discovery. That said, they do not mind laughing at each other, but not at themselves.

After Flora has become a Becker wife, she remains different to her sisters-in-law. She attracts attention to the Beckers in public in a way of which they previously could only have dreamt. They persist in showing their social inadequacy by joining outsiders gazing at the new Mrs Becker as if she were not related to them at all -an exotic flower, to allude to her name. Almost the whole family briefly abandon their stuffiness and allow themselves to be influenced by Flora's unconventional tastes and whims. She brings poetry and imagination into their drawing rooms. In his first adoring raptures her husband takes her condition for being a "real talent ... for acting" (Lavin 1987: 332). Her brother-in law Samuel has a Pre-Raphaelite image of Flora as dangerous and alien, yet alluring -another Victorian allusion. The Becker family represents a bourgeois, constrained and placid life, whereas Flora is the opposite: artistic, flamboyant, non-conformist, But enveloped by conventionality the Beckers cannot recognise the signs in Flora that her unconventionality is planting the seed of her ensuing mental illness.

The momentary change in the lives of the Beckers due to Flora's influence contrasts with

the characteristics in her and the other Becker wives. Flora is on the surface ruled by spontaneity, creativity and imagination, which to the Beckers is alien behaviour and therefore captivating. Their own aptitude for conformity assures them that the flamboyance they see in Flora's character will disappear as soon as she is married to Theobald. Marriage also becomes a two-faced issue for the Becker wives in their interaction with Flora. Although she is desperate to get married, to abide with convention, she conveys the idea to her sisters-in-law that marriage is a restrictive bond. But again the narrative voice expresses an opinion, as women's wedding rings are described as "thick bands of gold, guarded by big solitaires set in massive claws" (Lavin 1987: 336). The threatening and suffocating words suggest marriage as enforced captivity and lonely, and a state that only convention would make a woman enter voluntarily. Flora makes the other women feel uneasy because her ways overthrow what to them is the natural order of life. Significantly, however, while Flora rejects marriage in principle because she knows that it restricts particularly a woman's individual will, she is eager to marry, in order to safeguard an acceptable social position for herself as a woman, to be a wife.

Flora lives in a world of imagination into which the others cannot enter because of their ordinariness. She, on the other hand, cannot enter their world, because she is out of the ordinary. Writing poetry enables her to live within her dream world of similes, keep her mental condition in check and ease her frustration. The irony is that while she has artistic creative talents she is physically infertile, which matters more in society than artistic ability. Her character is in sharp contrast to the Beckers who are fertile but do not grow as individuals, and have no desire to do so. After her collection of poems has been published she loses the safety valve to keep her trauma from surfacing.

Flora increasingly impersonates the characteristics of the other women as her frustration. and consequently her illness, increases. She sees Samuel's pregnant wife, Honoria, as the most serious threat to her own vulnerability, as they married about the same time. Flora projects her sister-in-law's situation and persona onto herself. She in fact tries to conjure up a "resemblance" to the other Becker wives. in order to fit into the expected conventional sequence of events. marriage quickly followed by pregnancy.

Nevertheless, the narrative never criticises Flora's behaviour because it is justified by her desperate search for social respectability. Instead, the narrative voice enhances the plight of Flora, whose abilities are favourably contrasted with Honoria's poor intelligence and lack of education, to further enhance Flora's humiliating efforts to assume the identity of a woman who is obviously inferior to her, including lack of individuality. Put into this context, her condition takes on a further tragic aspect, as her mental illness is suggested to have been triggered by social pressure to conform. Flora's final outburst, in the persona of Honoria, confirms her projection of her own inability to deliver what is expected of her, domesticity and breeding, by seeing Honoria as a mirror image of herself. In Flora's imagination she switches identity with her sister-in-law and thereby becomes the socially accepted one by adopting the character of the pregnant Honoria, who consequently she imagines as the interior exile.

Flora wants parts of the conventional life of the other Becker wives, while they want the social status of being respected by the establishment. The narrative explains Flora's strategy: "Forward in time or back intime, it made no difference to Flora as long as she could escape from the tedium and the boredom of the present, just as it didn't matter to her whether it was Henrietta or Honoria she was impersonating as long as she stepped out of her own personality and became another being" (Lavin 1987: 345). Her psychological condition is in reality not different from what the other Beckers want for themselves. They aspire to what they cannot achieve, social acceptance in established society, respectability and security. But their self-discipline and lack of individual will or imagination stop them from crossing the line to enter the realm of madness. Theobald, despite his efforts to be more sophisticated and cultured than his family, does not have the sensitivity to notice that Flora is falling deeper and deeper into a psychological abyss. Because he is as conventional as his siblings, her growing psychological instability only makes him increasingly embarrassed and irritated; the narrative points out his general "lack of understanding". When the rest of the family only sees Flora's mental collapse as a "disgrace". Samuel, Honora's husband, deplores that the breath of fresh air brought into the lives of the family by Flora is gone. But his conventionality makes him simultaneously perceive her as "a flitting spirit never meant to mix with the likes of them" (Lavin 1987: 363). In other words, the staid Becker family, busy to conform to social convention and eager to fit into established society, would never have harmonised with Flora's apparent personality or interests.

Previous critics have focused on the theme of psychological disorder in the story: Zack Bowen calls it "a study in schizophrenia" (Bowen 1975: 33), and A. A Kelly sees Flora as "caught in the Becker cage" (Kelly, 1980: 21). Both comments are valid but they are not sufficient for a more comprehensive understanding of the story. It must be remembered that the schizophrenia is not only psychologically conditioned, but is also brought on by the social pressure that all the characters are trying to live up to in different ways. Flora's initially flamboyant behaviour, followed by adopting another person's character and subsequent psychological breakdown, is also her inverted way of trying to escape her inability to conform. She does not possess the self-discipline or the self-effacing conviction of the role of women in public life shared by the other Beckers. But escape is not possible, which is firmly established by Flora's mental breakdown, nor is it possible for the Beckers to flee their peripheral social position, no matter how hard they try to play by the rules of convention. Zack Bowen correctly observes in the story "the theme of the inescapability of one's fundamental life style" (Bowen, 1975: 34). I would like to extend that statement and add that this inescapability makes all characters internal exiles; they are uncomfortable in the environment in which they live and aspire to social goals that are unobtainable for them.

The women in "The Becker Wives" stand out as the most explicit victims of the morally and socially claustrophobic society in which Lavin's characters have to exist, rather than live. But their conditions are different from those of Lavin's other female characters in that they belong to a more prosperous section of society. Nevertheless, their lives in Dublin are socially

isolated and they have to contend with living up to norms of established society, norms the Becker family have set up for themselves in order to belong to a class from which they are in fact alienated. Flora, with the required pedigree to belong to that category to which her in-laws hotly aspire, is an outcast from that class because of her inability to conform to expectations as a woman: to have children and to focus on domestic duties as a wife. The narrative voice in the novella supports Flora's action in her claustrophobic situation and concludes that Victorian convention prevents individualistic and free-spirited people, women in particular, and can create a trauma leading to mental illness. From different perspectives, the fate of women in the upper echelons of society is no less cruel than that experienced by women in a less prosperous environment in Lavin's other stories.

The stories by Mary Lavin discussed here all deal with aspects of internal exile. Several female characters have attempted or are still trying to move away from the exilic condition. Isabel in "A Single Lady" exiled herself from life when she had made the conscious decision to return home. The young widows who feature in several stories are held back from finding new love by the unconscious abidance with the moral ethos and unwritten social code of conduct, forcing them to exile themselves from the company of men, through the in-built fear of being defeated by temptation. Even though these women recognise their dissatisfaction with life, they are not willing to 'jump' or to stray from home, which functions both as a prison and a place offering security.

But men are also shown to be exilic victims. Isabel's father in "A Single Lady" is an exile from his original social environment, which he realises in his attraction to the servant-girl. Manny, in "At Sallygap", has lived to regret his missed opportunity to go abroad to try his luck as a musician. Instead, he is trapped in a marriage that is not going anywhere. The narrative switch from Manny's thoughts to his wife's dissatisfaction emphasises marriage as exile, for both men and women, from opportunities in life, although often initially regarded as an escape from another misery.

Exilic emblems recur in Lavin's stories. Both Flora, in "The Becker Wives", and Alicia, in "In Loving Memory", are compared to small birds. This simile equates these two women with a free spirit who refuses to stay in the nest and give all her attention to domestic duty; instead, she wants to have an independent life. It is significant that Alicia's only way to stay in Ireland is to marry, otherwise she would have had to emigrate. Place also carries exilic importance. For those living in the country. Dublin symbolises freedom from internal exile, but for those living there, life in the city is just as pressurised as for those living in the country. Manny, in "At Sallygap", living in Dublin but not from there originally, has come to realise the constrictions of the city. The mail boat in the distance, pulling out from Dun Laoghaire, represents escape from internal exile. As for so many others, for Manny escape only becomes an option when he senses freedom at a distance, without the danger of becoming reality. Lally in "The Will" is unable to detach herself from the guilt emanating from her escape to Dublin, which has not brought her the freedom anticipated.

The omniscient narrators recurrently make their voices heard in the stories. These voices convey sympathy for those living under exilic conditions. The narratives demonstrate equal understanding for men and women; city dwellers as well as for those living in rural areas. The narrative voice is only overtly negative towards the Beckers in "The Becker Wives", in order to emphasise the cruel social pressure on the intellectual Flora.

The most obvious conclusion about characters -both men and women- in the stories who are trapped in constrictive lives is that dissatisfaction is not likely to lead to rebellious behaviour. lnstead they more often accept and consequently remain restrained by social convention and rules of conformity. They are not prepared to openly act upon their discontent, because the behavioural norm does not tolerate stepping out of line. Those who try to break away are considered subversive; they are internal exiles. Individual aspirations that would rock the boat of social stability are suppressed and these individuals are locked into isolation, and freedom from social restriction becomes momentary exilic wandering, only to swiftly emotionally choked by convention before the *status quo* is allowed to be broken.

But not only characters are exiles. The immediacy of the voice of the omniscient narrator in relation to the reader in the stories, in turn, removes it from the plot and the characters. Consequently, the narrator adopts the part of a distant observer and thereby the role of an inverted exile in relation to situations and characters who are not part of the concept of exile. This alien relationship occurs because the narrative voice prioritises conveying a particular agenda to the reader, that of exile, above other aspects in the lives of the characters.

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