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‘This is Your Magazine’: *The Bell* and Representations of Irish Identity in 1942

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Introduction

Ireland in the early 1940s exists in the imagination as a state in regressive isolation. Pursuing a policy of neutrality during the Second World War, officially named ‘the Emergency’, and implementing media censorship in an attempt to maintain this policy, the Government simultaneously pushed the narrative of a unified Irish identity in the wake of partition. Established in 1940, the literary journal *The Bell* sought to engage with these issues of identity, censorship, and modernity. Under the helm of Sean O’Faoláin as its founding editor, *The Bell* sought to create an alternative picture of Ireland, which would expose the complexity and variation of modern life, developed in opposition to the vision purported by the dominant ideology of the day; the ‘real’ Ireland which was rural, Catholic, Irish speaking, and was full of ‘cosy homesteads’.¹

By focusing on a single year in *The Bell*’s fourteen year-history, I hope to interrogate the positioning of this periodical in opposition to narrow definitions of Irish identity. I will do this by looking especially at several short stories it published by four different writers in 1942.² In the process, I will argue that short stories provide an essential strand in *The Bell*’s exploration of Irish identity alongside the editorials and articles it published. I will also interrogate what the medium of short fiction reveals about how Irish people experienced and articulated the complexity of their own identity. Elizabeth Bowen’s ‘Sunday Afternoon’, James Plunkett’s, ‘The Mother’, Frank O’Connor’s ‘Uprooted’, and Arnold Hill’s ‘The Fisher of Men’ serve as representative stories in this study. The choice of stories is informed by variations in the ways each of the writers saw themselves, in whole or in part, as Irish.

Moreover, it has been posited that the theme of isolation is a dominant one across Irish short fiction from this period.³ However, like identity, the analysis of the Irish short story, should be disentangled from limiting ideas of a ‘nationalist specificity’ and a single unifying theme, which makes them ‘Irish’.⁴ These chosen stories do not claim a sense of ‘Irishness’ through their theme of isolation, and instead use the tension between the individual and their community to collectively engage with recurrent themes of memory, violence (present and historic), and community more broadly. Many characters in these four works are isolated, but it is their link to their community identity which enables the writers to explore some of the different facets of Irish identity. Informed by

¹ Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-1985* (Fontana Press, 1985), 201.
Kelly Matthews, *The Bell Magazine and Representations of Irish Identity* (Four Courts Press, 2012), 104.

² Norman Vance, *Irish Literature: A Social History* (Blackwell, 1990), 218.

³ Deborah M. Averill, *The Irish Short Story for George Moore to Frank O’Connor* (University Press of America, 1982), 108.

⁴ Elke D’hoker and Stephanie Eggermont, eds., *The Irish Short Story : Traditions and Trends* (Peter Lang, 2014), 4.

these questions they demonstrate the role that short fiction published in *The Bell* played in expressing the complexities and tensions within Irish identity in 1942.

Elizabeth Bowen, 'Sunday Afternoon'

Elizabeth Bowen's story 'Sunday Afternoon', appeared in October 1942, and explores how the tension between Britain's involvement with the War and Irish neutrality served to complicate Anglo-Irish identity. The protagonist Henry, like Bowen herself, has a sense of identity which is notably hybrid, particularly in post-partition Ireland. He belongs to a cultural tradition defined by its combination of two strands of identity, Irish and British. Bowen explicates the complexity of this Anglo-Irish identity by creating a stark spatial divide between the two countries which this sense of self, with the sense of a collapsing wartime London juxtaposed with the relentlessly civilised Sunday afternoon in Dublin, and its 'air of being secluded behind glass' creating a sense of a temporal rupture between the two cities.⁵ Dublin, is stagnated in the memory of times past, rendering Henry a figure displaced from his community through his confrontation with the violence of modern life in London. This sense of displacement is compounded by the 'coldness... on the edge of things' which speaks to this looming sense that, despite the efforts of the Anglo-Irish to 'master' or 'deny' it, their identity is one which is ultimately fractured by this political divide exacerbated under the conditions of wartime.⁶ Similarly, when an older character, Ronald, states 'this outrage is *not* important. There is no place for it in human experience', the complexity of identity even within this small community is made clear.⁷ Bowen's inclusion of this phrase may be viewed as an indictment of Irish neutrality, which sees the characters wilfully blind to contemporary atrocities across Europe and the horrors of militarised violence. This isolates Henry, whose experience of violence is entrenched in his individual identity, suggested by the use of 'taboo' to describe his return, positioning him as an almost destructive force and harsh reminder of reality.⁸ This clash of reality against the dismissiveness of the older generation may reflect the contradiction within Anglo-Irish identity in this period. Built upon colonial violence, it is through this history that the ruling position of the Anglo-Irish was consolidated in Ireland. As a result, despite the decline of their position post-Partition, the characters are still afforded their peaceful Sunday afternoon, drawing upon the memory of their privileged past and ignoring the reality of contemporary violence. By positioning this story within her own cultural background and critiquing the complacent attitudes within her own community, Bowen illustrates the complexity of this kind of Irish identity, founded upon colonial violence, and now faced with divided loyalty between war and neutrality, caught between Ireland and Britain.

⁵ Elizabeth Bowen, "Sunday Afternoon," *The Bell* 5, no.1 (October 1942): 19.

Heather Ingman, *A History of the Irish Short Story* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 154.

⁶ Bowen, "Sunday Afternoon," 19.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

Furthermore, Henry, in the dual act of returning, both to Dublin then London, destabilises the stagnation of time enacted by those around him, suggesting this way of life is unsustainable in the modern world. He does this alongside a younger, more cynical character, Maria, who also seeks to escape to London. Her watch represents an intrusion of modern, mechanical time, which prevails over dreamlike stagnation. As Henry continues his cycle of returning, he takes the bus she awaits with her wristwatch, counting down the minutes until she leaves. Yet she is thwarted by Henry, and thus the final isolation of modern life and its rupturing of the old enactment of Anglo-Irish identity is compounded by Henry's warning to Maria; 'You will have an identity number but no identity'.⁹ This stripping away of individual cultural identity imbues the movement between Anglo-Irish Dublin to modern London with a sense of finality. Bowen conveys the fracturing of this identity, suggesting that the elevated status gained through Henry's Anglo-Irish background, which distinguishes him as an individual in Dublin, is rendered meaningless in London, where he is just another number. Ultimately, Bowen uses short fiction to position three different generations of Anglo-Irish individuals against each other, exploring how the reality of war infringes upon this variation of Irish identity, already complex in its colonial origins, and allows her audience an insight into the tensions which threaten this fragile community in post-partition Ireland.

James Plunkett, 'The Mother'

'The Mother', by James Plunkett, was published in November 1942. Like Bowen, the experience Plunkett presents is one which negotiates the violence of the past decades with Ireland's new position of neutrality. His story is also set in Dublin, which is different to the rural focus of much Irish short fiction in this period.¹⁰ He explores how the relationship between Irish identity, particularly Irish, urban, working-class masculinity, and violence is in flux; this is exemplified by the Flathery family. The fates of the eponymous Mother's male family cumulatively present the image of militarised masculinity which drove the violent struggle for Irish independence only a few decades before. Even in the contemporary moment, the Irish male is presented as a former soldier, with references to the Boer War, the First World War, and the Irish War of Independence all contained within the relentless, repeated phrase 'coming and going'.¹¹ However, read in the context of Irish neutrality, Plunkett suggests that this conception of Irish identity is beginning to shift with the younger generation. This is exemplified by Jem, the youngest son, whose 'hands [are] clean', literally owing to his white collar job as a warehouse clerk, but also metaphorically due to his youth, which has prevented him from taking part in either the Great War or the Troubles.¹² Jem is the first in a line of men not to take an

⁹ Ibid., 27.

¹⁰ Kelly, *The Bell Magazine*, 165.

¹¹ James Plunkett, "The Mother," *The Bell* 5, no.2 (November 1942): 101.

¹² Plunkett, "The Mother," 100.

active role in perpetuating violence, and moreover, his non-participation is politically sanctioned as part of state policy. However, Jem is still emasculated by his proximity to his mother, to whom he was ‘kept... close’.¹³ This diminishing of his independence suggests that violence has not been completely usurped as a key component of Irish working-class masculinity, owing to its widespread prevalence across generations.

Furthermore, Plunkett also explores how collective memory serves to collapse the distinctions between kinds of violence carried out by Irish men over the previous decades. The phrase ‘no one thought much of that’, and the diminishing noun ‘trouble’, encapsulates an ambivalence towards the political motives which governed their violent past and divided their loyalties between the British army and Irish independence.¹⁴ For Plunkett, both of these fraught histories co-exist, with the overarching identification of ‘soldier’ enough to create a sustaining bond between the men. With this bond as a foundation, the men engage in a new post-Partition form of identity established on shared rituals, such as watching Gaelic football, drinking, and going to mass together, all the while recognising a collective memory of a violent past. Yet, these rituals also signal a shift away from identity rooted in political violence, and represent the hegemony of a Catholic, ‘Irish’ identity. Thus, complexity, while recognised, is detached from its political associations as new rituals of camaraderie within the acceptable confines of the new, neutral state, become dominant forms of negotiating identity within working-class Dublin.

Frank O’Connor, ‘Uprooted’

O’Connor also explores themes of community, isolation, and memory to illustrate the destabilisation of Irish identity during this period. His later theory of the Irish short story representing ‘a lonely voice on the margins of culture’, associated with a ‘submerged population group’, is one which informs much of his work. Yet, ‘Uprooted’, published in December 1942, indicates that this lonely voice is not innately set apart, but is driven into isolation due to societal developments and material constraints in modern Ireland.¹⁵ Thus, having undergone urban migration, the protagonist Ned finds that his displacement is exacerbated by the intrusion of memory. At the opening of the story, O’Connor presents the solidarity between Ned and the disappointed siblings with whom he lodges with and reminisces about their rural past. The anticlimactic opening – ‘the city was what he had always wanted. And now the city had failed him’ – suggests a perpetual state of isolation, with ‘always’ hinting that Ned constantly wishes himself away from where he is.¹⁶ Suburban life acts as a

¹³ Ibid., 103.

¹⁴ Ibid., 101.

¹⁵ Frank O’Connor, *The Lonely Voice : A Study of the Short Story* (The World Publishing Company, 1963), 20. Ingman, *A History of the Irish Short Story*, 183.

¹⁶ Frank O’Connor, “Uprooted,” *The Bell* 5, no.3 (December 1942): 210.

constraining force, highlighted by the ‘dusty garden’ and ‘railings’ in contrast to the open spaces of his childhood. It can be argued that O’Connor presents this displacement from a traditional rural identity as one which is detrimental to Ned’s sense of self, as his ‘nature... contract(s) around him’, and he finds himself lost and ‘submissive’.¹⁷ Moreover, as he returns to the landscape of his rural childhood, he is, like Henry in ‘Sunday Afternoon’ faced with its stagnation, stating, ‘nothing was changed’.¹⁸ This physical stagnation is coupled with Ned’s acute sense of timelessness, in which he feels like he has ‘dropped out of Time’s pocket’.¹⁹ He therefore moves beyond the mechanised time of the city, signified by the ‘trams clanging up and down past the railings’, and into a landscape which seems to exist outside of time, perpetuated by both his romanticised memory of childhood and sense of present displacement. Ned evokes ‘magic, magic, magic’ in his lyrical description of the landscape, comparing his vision to ‘a children’s picture book’, as O’Connor indicates how this landscape, bound up in memory of childhood, has become unreal for him, and a place he has outgrown.²⁰ This moment of epiphany, recognising his ultimate inability to return to his old life, reflects how modern Ireland is in flux, with urban migration acting as a force of permanent physical, and in this case, spiritual displacement. The connection between identity and the rural landscape, long held as the ideological epitome of Irish identity, is ruptured. Ned and his brother, Tom, can only experience their place in the community through memory, and crucially, both feel the inevitability of their return to an isolated, urban existence.

Furthermore, this theme of isolation is also mediated through his family, where his brother, Tom, a priest, is ‘shut...off’ from him due to his ordination into religious life.²¹ This is made apparent in the falsity of their relations, with Tom trying to ‘surmount the barrier’ with ‘affected bon-homie’.²² These attempts to perform familial closeness only amplify the individual isolation each brother feels, as both are displaced from the familiarity of home into the lives they thought they wanted. Only at the climax does Ned realise the extent of his brother’s crushing loneliness in which the only relief is paradoxically to give voice to fears of isolation of which he cannot speak. Like Ned, moving beyond the realm of childhood into modern life has ruptured Tom’s sense of self, and he fears he has little left to live for. For both brothers, returning home only exacerbates their isolation, experiencing briefly the close connections and prospects of love they have rejected in their migration. Therefore, O’Connor portrays modern Irish life as one where the shifting nature of Irish identity, destabilised by migration and founded upon the fragile memory of another time, contributes to individual and collective dissatisfaction and stifling isolation for the young and displaced.

¹⁷ O’Connor, “Uprooted,” 212.

¹⁸ Ibid., 113.

¹⁹ Ibid., 226.

²⁰ Ibid., 231.

²¹ Ibid., 212.

²² Ibid.

Arnold Hill, 'The Fisher of Men'

Arnold Hill's 'The Fisher of Men', published in August 1942, appeared as part of *The Bell*'s third Ulster Issue. These special issues, the first one published in July 1941 and the back-to-back publication of the final two, illustrate how O'Faoláin and *The Bell* engaged with the issue of partition. This is quite unlike most periodicals of the day. It is notable that these three issues are called 'Ulster issues' rather than 'Northern Irish issues', since the latter term is far more controversial and would have necessitated full recognition of the Border. In doing so, O'Faoláin allowed the magazine, and its contributing writers, to sidestep engagement with the political reality of partition (still only twenty years old), in favour of a more traditional designation of the province of Ulster. Yet, by marking Ulster out for special consideration O'Faoláin showed that for all its ideological instability, some sense of cultural difference distinguished the province, which included Northern Ireland and three counties of the Free State, from the rest of Ireland. (No comparable issues were published on Leinster, Connacht, or Munster writing, for instance.) In this period, conflicting loyalties were exacerbated by the divided participation in the War, with the Border once more a fraught physical manifestation of ideological differences. However, O'Faoláin also reconciles with the idea that different communities can co-exist on a shared island. Through showcasing Ulster writers and their perspectives in his magazine of Irish life, he attempts to bridge the cultural gap between the divided island.²³

Despite the threat of censorship, Hill engages directly with the material consequences of war through references to another kind of 'Sunday night' in which 'the bomber came over' and the 'sirens wailed'.²⁴ Although it is not stated, it can be inferred that the story is set in one of the urban centres of Ulster bombed in 1941, likely Belfast. The community in Hill's work occupy a space where air raid sirens and shelters are a normalised part of their urban environment, with the destruction of the city serving as a visual marker of the intrusion of violence upon the island. His vivid simile of shells 'bursting like fireworks' and the rich auditory description of 'a burst', 'a fierce gust', a 'heavy explosion' and 'a crumbling, scuffing sound' of falling houses, evokes a sense of the all-consuming destructive force of the War.²⁵ This violence is witnessed by the community, with the description narrated using the collective pronoun 'we'.²⁶ This exemplifies the idea of the experience of violence as something which unites the community, providing a counterpoint to Bowen's divisions between those who experience violence and those who do not. By writing through an unnamed narrator who moves between 'me' and 'we', Hill presents Ulster identity as one which is strengthened beyond the individual into collective feeling and action, conveyed through the phrases 'we stood together in the

²³ Matthews, *The Bell Magazine*, 131.

²⁴ Arnold Hill, "The Fisher of Men," *The Bell* 4, no. 3 (August 1942): 334.

²⁵ Hill, "The Fisher of Men," 334.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

dark and listened' and 'we began to sing.'²⁷ Both to witness and counteract the effects of the violence, they experience as a community, collective action unites those 'in the dark' and provides a way through which they can mediate their shared identity as citizens of Ulster. Within this community, Holy Joe represents another kind of isolated figure, a street preacher, and a 'familiar character' in 'our part of the city.' As a religious figure, albeit an extreme one, the narrator espouses an attitude that deems him strange, comedic, and a figure of pity in his public performance of music and fervent preaching. However, in the moment of crisis he channels the religious sentiment and rituals of the wider community, moving beyond his own isolation to emerge as a leader, indicating a shared sense of Ulster Protestant identity which binds this collective and sets it apart from other kinds of identity on the island. Just as Joe, as an outsider, is absorbed into the community, transforming the shelter into a site of a 'meeting' and song, *The Bell* unites different kinds of experiences under one banner of 'Irish life.' As religion simultaneously isolates and unites Joe, the phrase 'our part', might not only refer to the geographical location of where the main character is from but 'our' also implies community ownership.²⁸ As in Plunkett's story, community is formed through common rituals, this time singing hymns which have been taught through religious instruction, marking out a kind of national or communal identity the same way watching football and going to mass together bonds the men of 'The Mother'. Thus, Hill presents a view of the complexity of Irish identity which runs almost parallel to what is normative in the Free State, being aligned with a sense of British, Protestant identity, yet still falls under the realm of 'Irish' by virtue of its inclusion within an Irish literary journal.

Conclusion

To conclude, these four stories published in *The Bell* in 1942 show some of the ways that O'Faoláin's magazine sought to engage with different configurations and complexities of Irish identity. By showcasing writers from a variety of cultural backgrounds, particularly with the focus on Ulster writers, short fiction was positioned as a key component of the early mission of *The Bell* to expand perceptions, providing a primary insight into how these writers engaged with the reality of life in modern Ireland. The stories published illustrate that far from living up to the dominant ideology which espoused a homogenous, rural, Catholic population closely orientated around family life as the ultimate representation of Irish life, there was far more variation among individuals and within the wider community. Issues of censorship, the War, and migration, are mediated through the recurring themes of violence, memory, and community, and this conveys a population whose sense of identity was not fixed, but which moved towards the understanding of something more complex and various. Like today, these writers worked to expand the limiting ideas of what Irish life and literature could

²⁷ Ibid., 334.

Ibid., 336.

²⁸ Ibid., 332

look like, turning the short story form not into a distinctly 'Irish' genre limited by nationalism, but a form which could hold the multitudes of Irish identity and interrogate them in turn.

Word Count: 3,238

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