

Double Readings and Double Rewritings

Alternative Texts in Mary O'Donnell's Remake of Mary Lavin's "The Widow's Son"

Giovanna Tallone

Abstract: *Mary O'Donnell's short story "The Story of Maria's Son", from her collection Storm over Belfast (2008), consciously and openly rewrites Mary Lavin's story "The Widow's Son" in the urban setting of contemporary Ireland. O'Donnell follows the steps of a significant figure among Irish women writers and plays with the plot of her source text in a process of expansion, providing background information to weave a realistic pattern of suburban life. However, O'Donnell also engages with the structure, tone and narrative modes of the Lavin original and reproduces the pattern of Lavin's story in her deliberate use of a double ending, or of alternative endings, thus questioning narrative authority. The purpose of this paper is to analyse Mary O'Donnell's "The Story of Maria's Son", vis-à-vis Lavin's "The Widow's Son", shedding light on the way both texts elaborate conflicting endings and taking into account the variety of narrative voices in both stories. If on the level of plot the tragedy of the loss of the son is generated by a mother-son conflict, on the level of discourse and structure O'Donnell develops the conflicting double endings into a postmodern reflection on the construction of texts.*

Keywords: *rereading; rewriting; alternative ending; Mary O'Donnell; Mary Lavin.*

In her 2009 essay "Irish Women and Writing: An Overview of the Journey from Imagination into Print, 1980-2008", Mary O'Donnell sheds light on the difficulties and problems Irish women writers of her generation met with in a literary landscape dominated by men, considering issues of publication, censorship as well as marginalization of female creativity.

The awareness of gender highlights O'Donnell's work in her engagement with matters of femininity and its cultural constructions. For example, in her 1998 poetry collection *Unlegendary Heroes*, the hidden life and work of women are retrieved from anonymity and juxtaposed to the heroic deeds of great men. The title poem is made of a list of (un)heroic figures in everyday life whose extraordinary deeds are celebrated, as they wash "a week's sheets, shirts / and swaddling, bake bread and clean the house / all of a Monday" (O'Donnell 1998, 22). In a similar way, femininity and issues of motherhood and especially infertility recur in her short story "Breath of the Living" from her first short story collection *Strong Pagans* (1991), in her poem "Antarctica" from the 1990 collection *Reading the Sunflowers in September* as well as in her novels *The Light Makers* (1992) and to a lesser extent *Where They Lie* (2014).

Nevertheless, Mary O'Donnell has mixed feelings about feminism and female

creativity, as she does not want any label and gives priority to her work as a poet and fiction writer. This is reiterated in time in a variety of interviews starting from an early one in 1991, in which she emphasized her individuality as a writer:

I've just defined myself as a poet, an Irish poet. I couldn't conceive of any feminist label. My poetry comes first. I don't want to write propaganda ... (Somerville-Arjat, Wilson 22).

In 2003 she claimed: "although I am a feminist, I am probably an unconventional one ... a writer needs to write, more than anything else" (Moloney, Thompson 118), and more recently she underlines her being simply a writer:

I wouldn't refer to myself as a feminist *writer*, any more than I would call myself a capitalist, socialist, atheist writer. Feminism ... does not dictate what I write (Fogarty 159).

Many years before, in a different generation, Mary Lavin made similar remarks concerning her writing: "reluctant to invoke gender as an explanation of her work" (Ingman 172), Lavin stated her right to write as an individual:

I write as a person. I don't think of myself as a woman who writes. I am a writer. Gender is incidental to that (Levenson 225).

During Mary Lavin's lifetime, as Anne Owen Weeks writes, Lavin did not "see herself as a feminist" (Weekes 30) and she can hardly be called "a feminist in the contemporary sense" (Meszaros 39): "some of her views on motherhood or career women sit uneasily with contemporary feminists" (D'hoker 2013; 5). And yet, Lavin gave voice to "inarticulate people" (Levenson 220), praising Irish women and "female struggle within the male-dominated State" (Stevens 1996; 25). In a way, like Mary O'Donnell, Lavin celebrated "unlegendary heroes" in her stories and her role in the Dublin literary scene in the 1950s and 60s makes her an "important trailblazer for Irish women writers" (Ingman 172), so as to become a sort of model for younger generations. In the celebratory television documentary *An Arrow in Flight* broadcast by RTÉ in 1991, Nuala O'Faolain recalled the importance Lavin had in supporting her academic studies and writing career, and her stories became and still remain a reference point for Irish women writers who occasionally celebrate Lavin and her work. Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, for example, pays homage to Lavin as "a forerunner in the short story form" (Ingman 253) in her 2000 collection *Pale Gold of Alaska*. Her story "At Sally Gap" contains cross-references to Lavin's "At Sallygap" and in "The Banana Boat" Ní Dhuibhne openly mentions Mary Lavin's "The Widow's Son":

I realize right now that there are two ends to the story of my day and the story of my life. I think of Mary Lavin's story about the widow's son ... (Ní Dhuibhne 209-10).

Lavin's "The Widow's Son" is a captivating text for different reasons: it draws attention to the deprived conditions of the nameless widow's life and "depicts the constraints of a harsh

economic climate that creates a world where ... emotions cannot be articulated” (Ingman 172). It is also an interesting textual experiment in the art of fiction as it metatextually reflects on the story and its own making providing an alternative construction and a different ending. Lavin uses the tone of a fairy tale or of a popular tale to recount the sacrifices of a nameless widow for her son Packy, who is good at school and hopes to win a scholarship “to one of the big colleges in the city” (Lavin 1964; 105). When Packy is killed trying to avoid an old hen that has come into his way, with a lapse from her “customarily unobtrusive style” (Bowen 46), Lavin intrudes into the story she has been telling to say that what she has told is a fiction and she is going to tell the story all over again, this time saving Packy and having him kill the old hen while rushing home to tell his mother he has been awarded the scholarship. The loss of the hen gives rise to an overreaction in the widow, and instead of praising Packy, the widow humiliates him in front of the neighbours in order to show them that a widow’s son is no “ewe lamb” (Lavin 1964; 109). Deeply wounded by his mother’s behavior, Packy leaves home never to come back.

Lavin’s “The Widow’s Son” is one of her few open reflections on writing, it can be considered an “artistic manifesto” (Bowen 57) and an experiment in narrative methods (Kelly 115). In a similar way, “A Story with a Pattern” is a “direct statement on the purpose of Mary Lavin’s art” (Peterson 76), and it implicitly works on issues of gender in the contrast between the rigid position of the male reader in the story who criticizes the female narrator’s lack of plot and the freedom of the woman writer who claims that “Life in general isn’t rounded off like that at the edges... Life is chaotic; its events are unrelated” (Lavin 1995; 225). Likewise, in “The Widow’s Son” Lavin indulges on the creative freedom of the writer to control artistic arrangement (Stevens 2013; 171), the narrator is “a storyteller, self-consciously reflecting on the story and its moral” (D’hoker 2016; 89). Therefore, the story is a sort of essay in fiction writing, its metafictional dimension and the suggestion of alternative endings are a nod to the postmodern questioning of narrative authority.

Mary O’Donnell acknowledges Lavin’s experiment with text and textuality writing her own version of Lavin’s story in “The Story of Maria’s Son”. O’Donnell has always been aware of the importance of Lavin’s story. “The notion that stories – she says – have more than one ending, just as human experience does, makes sense” (Fogarty 169). Her decision to “engineer a more contemporary version of the Lavin’s story, out of writerly curiosity” (169) is consistent with O’Donnell’s concern with writing and with her lack of belief in “closure”: “I don’t believe in closure and the story with two endings allowed me to do that” (169). Therefore, O’Donnell’s “The Story of Maria’s Son” is a writerly and critical “response” (O’Donnell 2008; 63) to Lavin’s story, a rewriting that gives her the opportunity to play with the pretext of a forerunner and to reflect on the act of writing, retrieving Lavin’s story from its neglected past. O’Donnell acknowledges Lavin’s pretext to highlight her own text as an intertext in the closing note to “The Story of Maria’s Son”, and the dialogic construction of her story is part of her concern with form.

“The Story of Maria’s Son” is part of Mary O’Donnell’s second collection of short stories *Storm over Belfast* (2008). The protagonists’ “unease” (Hand 2008) in the various stories is marked by inner and outer conflicts that take different forms. A father’s discovery of his teenage daughter’s sexuality in “Fadó, Fadó”, the lack of communication between youth and old age in “Come to Me, Maitresse”, or academic rivalry and competition in “Canticles”

highlight the impossibility of reconciliation with one's own past, the dark corners in individual souls, and even in love the act of sex becomes an element of dominance (Hand 2008), a site of conflict.

Conflict between mother and son is developed in "The Story of Maria's Son", where the mother is incapable of publicly expressing her love for and her pride in her son. The result of her emotional aphasia is that she eventually loses her son forever. However, this story is also a site of textual conflict in its open use of a double ending or of alternative endings. It is a playful text that reminds the reader of its own artificiality as it openly refers to the story and its own writing, the reiterated use of the second-person pronoun "you" in direct address to the reader reproduces the colloquial style of oral storytelling, and in its open statement that this is an unreliable text, the story is made, unmade and remade, while an authorial voice comments on its own making.

In Mary O'Donnell's conscious rewriting, Lavin's story is a palimpsest, to recall Gérard Genette's terminology, who considers transposition "serious transformation" (Genette 212). The relationship between hypotext and hypertext creates parallelisms and cross-references, a web of interconnections in which expansion and/or compression have a relevant role in making "The Story of Maria's Son" an aftertext. In fact, Mary O'Donnell consciously and openly rewrites Lavin's "The Widow's Son" and the title and opening paragraph ring as a familiar pre-text:

This is the story of Maria's son, but it is a story with two endings (O'Donnell 2008; 46).

Here O'Donnell reproduces Lavin's opening of "The Widow's Son" nearly verbatim:

This is the story of a widow's son, but it is a story that has two endings (Lavin 1964; 105).

About sixty years separate Lavin's story from O'Donnell's rewriting. Lavin's story was first published in 1946 in the anthology *Irish Harvest*, where it appeared with the title "The Story of the Widow's Son". Over the years, in the various reprints and/or editions, the title changed to "The Widow's Son" in Lavin's 1951 collection *A Single Lady and Other Stories* and in the first volume of Lavin's *Stories* in 1964. The story was also published as a single issue in 1993 by the American Publisher Creative Education under the title "The Story of the Widow's Son". This double title draws attention to the double nature of the story and to the fictional world that is created in the act of story-telling, and is consistent with Lavin's artistic intentions, in that she meant it to be a reflection on the art of writing and an "insight into the art of storytelling" (Peterson 83). Lavin endlessly rewrote and corrected her own stories, and in the case of "The Widow's Son" the changes are slight, such as omissions of phrases or words, changes in punctuation, word order or paragraphs, but the story basically remains the same.

As a matter of fact, Lavin's "The Widow's Son" is in itself a form of self-contained rewriting, as the sequence of two possible endings makes each version a rewriting of the other, which enhances the conscious self-reflexivity of the story and highlights Lavin's experiment in story-telling.

Mary O'Donnell rewrites Lavin's story in the context of contemporary urban Ireland, and her "Story of Maria's Son" is an interesting case of intertextuality and rewriting within a framework that Lubomir Doležel defined as transposition, which "preserves the design and the main story of the protoworld but locates them in a different temporal or spatial setting or both" (Doležel 2006). In fact, the timelessness of Lavin's story is replaced by open references to events of the recent past broadcast on television: "great towers crumbled in New York, ... famines and despair ravaged the people of Darfur" (O'Donnell 2008; 56). Likewise, the shift from a rural to an urban setting is marked by references to Dublin topography, "Ringsend and Ballsbridge" (52), and the way the city has changed – "It's a cosmopolitan city now. It's big ... very big and full of foreigners" (52), "Full of migrants" (58), which implicitly anticipates the death of George (this is the son's name) not in a bicycle accident but as a consequence of a violent robbery in the house. In the alternative ending, George leaves home after his mother has accused him of deliberately not preventing the robbery

At the same time, O'Donnell also plays with the plot of the source text in a process of expansion, providing background information to weave a realistic pattern of suburban life. Again, according to Doležel, expansion "extends the scope of the protoworld by filling its gaps, constructing a prehistory or posthistory" (Doležel 2007). The protoworld of Lavin's story is extended and developed with the introduction of new episodes and new characters, with details about Maria's various jobs and references to her past. O'Donnell often works with direct quotation and follows the same or very similar patterns of speech, sentences and paragraph organization as in the Lavin story, sometimes using compression besides expansion, both in terms of content and language.

Thus, Mary O'Donnell's conscious rewriting of Lavin's story is an interesting intertextual experiment. She openly acknowledges Mary Lavin in a paratextual remark, a paragraph graphically separated from the story by a blank space and printed in italics:

This story was written in response to Mary Lavin's "The Story of the Widow's Son". I have deliberately followed the form and tone of Lavin's masterpiece, although the context is contemporary. My purpose was to explore the possibilities of a morality tale with two different outcomes in an urban setting (O'Donnell 2008; 63).

In this addendum, Mary O'Donnell uses the word "explore" with the same intention Lavin had in experiments with various kinds of form and storytelling (Stevens 1996; 26). The expression "morality tale" is an interesting cross-reference to Lavin's "The Widow's Son", which has occasionally been defined as an "exemplum" (Harmon 94) whose final didacticism may sound as an imposition (Peterson 84-85). Interestingly, Mary O'Donnell calls her own story a "response", involving a quasi-formulaic, ritual engagement in the act of rewriting a story that is itself a reflection on writing, as well as a rewriting of its own in its two endings. O'Donnell acknowledges Lavin's pretext to highlight her own text as an intertext. "Writers are in dialogue with writers who have gone before" (Wymard) Mary O'Donnell once said, and issues of form and the process of creativity are consciously present in both writers.

In "The Story of Maria's Son", O'Donnell engages herself with Lavin's *modus operandi*, as Lavin once said that her stories often develop from an idea or a question (Kelly 136). And in "The Widow's Son" Lavin literally asks a question to develop the second version of the story

indulging in the pleasurable game of storytelling. After Packy's death, the widow is persecuted by a question:

Why did he put the price of an old clucking hen over the price of his own life?
(Lavin 1964; 108)

In authorial metacommentary, Lavin puts herself into the eyes and the voice of the neighbours, who have acted as a sort of chorus so far as witnesses and spectators, and makes them become storytellers asking a question, wondering what would have happened:

But surely some of those neighbours must have been stirred to wonder what would have happened had Packy not yielded to his impulse of fear, and had, instead, ridden boldly over the old clucking hen? (108)

Lavin's story mixes different genres or forms of writing, exemplum, fairy tale, folk tale and self-reflexive fiction, and can be divided into five different sequences: a prefatory paragraph, the first version of the story, an authorial intervention on the art of storytelling, the second version, and the final didactic commentary. Mary O'Donnell follows the same pattern, enlarging or compressing certain episodes or sequences updating them to the new context and adding a paratextual metacommentary on her purpose for rewriting Lavin's story.

The opening paragraph is nearly identical in both Lavin's and O'Donnell's stories, where the adversative linker "but" sheds light on the conflict between two possible endings. However, O'Donnell chooses to transform the archetypal nameless poor widow into a single mother called Maria. In this first departure from the Lavin source, O'Donnell makes the fairy-tale tone of "The Widow's Son" less relevant. In fact, Lavin starts her story with the voice of a traditional storyteller or of a fairy tale: "There was once a widow". This is the "tone of a raconteuse" whose "conversational style" takes for granted the presence of an audience (Deane 14) and anticipates the direct address to the reader to be found in the authorial reflection on writing:

So, perhaps, if I try to tell you what I myself think might have happened had Packy killed that cackling hen, you will not accuse me of abusing my privileges as a writer
(Lavin 1964; 108).

In a further revision of the story published in the collection *In a Café* in 1995, Lavin slightly changed the beginning into "Once there was a widow" (Lavin 1995; 227), thus giving greater emphasis to the fabulistic stance of the story by recurring to a formulaic statement. This is highlighted by the lack of specific time reference and by the vagueness of space as the nameless widow lives "in a small neglected village at the foot of a steep hill" (Lavin 1964; 105). The routine of her work draws attention to the fabulistic numberless number embedded in "a hundred sacrifices" (105). Likewise, a pattern of repetitions characterizes Lavin's narrative tone, and the recurring iterative use of the same expression becomes a folk-tale formula:

It was for Packy's sake that she walked for hours along the road ...
It was for his sake that she walked back and forth to the town ...

It was for his sake that she got up in the cold dawning hours to gather mushrooms ... (105)

And as in a fairy tale, the widow has a nearly magic power of language which she manipulates to make Packy's promising future easier: "she did not tell him about her plans" (105), "she threatened him, day and night, that if he didn't turn out well she would put him to work on the road, or in the quarry under the hill", which somehow anticipates the abusive language of the second version, and her "gruff words" and "sharp tongue" are a mask for her "pride" and "joy" (105).

The mother-son relationship reproduces Lavin's story for children "A Likely Story", where the roots of Irish folklore take the form of a little boy's encounter with a leprechaun. As in "The Widow's Son", a possessive dominating mother (Weekes 107) dismisses her son's tall tales as "likely stories" and in both stories the contrast of conflicting feelings highlights a "dangerous mixture of pride and deprecation" (O'Brien 24). Interestingly, the boy is called Packy.

In "The Story of Maria's Son" Mary O'Donnell removes the formula "There was once ..." providing a closer and more realistic perspective on the contemporary time of the story but reproducing Lavin's pattern of speech.

Maria lived in a small neglected suburb on the edge of the city and at the foot of the mountains (O'Donnell 2008; 46).

If "the small neglected suburb ... at the foot of the mountains" is a coreferent to the small neglected village at the foot of a steep hill, traditionally the magic world of the fairies, the working-class background of the protagonist takes over and in a process of expansion O'Donnell fills the gap of the mother's life creating a past for her:

Eighteen years before, she met his father on the one holiday she had ever had ... Herself and the girls in the biscuit factory had clubbed together and booked two weeks in Benidorm (46).

If the opening paragraph casts attention to the self-consciousness of the story, in the second paragraph O'Donnell develops the holiday in Spain as a sort of fiction, since Maria is astonished by the place's "postcard beauty" (46). The fiction turns into romance when Maria meets Jorge, who is himself a sort of hero from romance, "with golden brown eyes, dark skin that felt like satin" (46). Jorge is a printer, so in a way he is part of the printed world of fiction.

In the expansion of the protoworld, O'Donnell provides a physical description for George who has "vital, straight shoulders, slim hips and ... golden brown eyes" (50). In the same way, she enlarges the character of the neighbour who talks to the mother while waiting for her son. In the Lavin story he is just an anonymous "neighbour", "an old man" (Lavin 1964, 106), who becomes "an old laboring man coming up the road" (109) in the second version of the story. In "The Story of Maria's Son", O'Donnell provides him with more precise features and characterization in tune with a suburban background:

He was an old widower who passed much of the time voluntarily collecting litter from around the pavements of the estate (O'Donnell 2008; 51).

In the first version of Lavin's story the neighbour is a witness of the accident in which Packy is killed, but he is also an agent for destruction and conflict in the second version, as his sniggering at Packy being "a ewe lamb" (Lavin 1964; 109) is at the roots of his mother's behavior. Mary O'Donnell makes the character kinder but also subtler and more sarcastic, as "he teased gently" speaking of her "lambkin son" "in a knowing voice" (O'Donnell 2008; 58).

O'Donnell also replaces the widow's concern for food with Maria's shopping at the supermarket in anticipation of something to celebrate, so the cabbages the widow sells in town, the mushrooms she gathers "that would take the place of food that had to be bought with money", the eggs that "paid for Packy's clothes" and his books (Lavin 1964, 105) have a co-referent in the fancy consumer's goods Maria sees and buys:

Italian breads and French breads, then added some Polish bread ... two thickly cut steak fillets, a head of lettuce, garlic, vine tomatoes and small new potatoes from Cyprus. For dessert they could have that rich ice cream George so liked. Strawberry cheesecake flavor ... (O'Donnell 2008; 53).

In self-conscious storytelling in the second version the moment of shopping allows intrusion on the part of the narrator who mentions "a bottle of red wine I forgot to mention in the first story" (58). Indulging in the pleasure of listing food, however, O'Donnell recalls the tradition of fairy tales, where the description of the abundance of food is emblematic of a magic world.

In the more realistic context of the urban story, George "studies on his way home" on the bus (51), which is a compression of the mythologizing in the words of the widow in Lavin's story:

Packy would travel three times that distance if there was a book at the other end of the road (Lavin 1964; 106).

A similar kind of recontextualization involves the two versions of the story. The rural context of "The Widow's Son" "depicts the difficult economic climate" (Ingman 172) in which the story develops. Selling eggs is a meaningful source of income for the widow, yet losing one hen that "wasn't worth more than six shillings" (Lavin 1964; 108) does not explain her violent reaction in the second version. The widow is occasionally identified with her hens, as Lavin uses similar verbs to describe their movements; the hen "craned her head forward" (108) in the same way as the widow "strained out farther over the gate" (106) waiting for Packy. In O'Donnell's story hens and mother overlap. In fact, Maria "felt irritable and wandered impatiently up and down her own path" (O'Donnell 2008; 51) thus rewriting the hens' behavior in "The Widow's Son", where "the hens and chickens were pecking irritably at the dry ground and wandering up and down the road in bewilderment" (Lavin 1964; 106).

Mary O'Donnell's process of expansion occasionally involves fleeting remarks or expressions that become narrative topics. For example, the widow accuses Packy of killing the hen on purpose in order not to go to school if there is "no money in the box" (111). The

figurative expression “money in the box” in Lavin’s story provides O’Donnell with a narrative nucleus in “The Story of Maria’s Son”. In fact, Maria keeps part of her money “in a narrow tin box ... beneath the crimson layered skirt of an ornamental Spanish doll” (O’Donnell 2008; 48). Paradigmatically, the box of money and the Spanish doll are agents of destruction and conflict in the story replacing the role of the old hen, since in O’Donnell’s story George is killed trying to save his mother’s money as vandals ramshackle the house.

O’Donnell recontextualises Lavin’s story in nearly direct quotation, using prolepsis to shed light on the accident and its reasons:

It was only afterwards, when the harm was done, that Maria began to think that it might perhaps have been the presence of that doll in the landing window that gave some peering Peter, some crack cocaine addict, the idea that she had nice, worthwhile things in the house, that it might be a worthwhile place to turn over (54).

Like the widow, Maria blames herself for what has happened, trying to explain the unexplainable. O’Donnell reproduces Lavin’s paragraph, its paratactic sentence structure and use of perfect modal, but replaces “the flapping of her own apron that frightened the old clucking hen” (Lavin 1964; 107) with the doll:

It was only afterwards, when the harm was done, that the widow began to think that it might, perhaps, have been the flapping of her own apron that frightened the old clucking hen, and sent her flying out over the garden wall into the middle of the road (107).

The Spanish doll is the result of a process of expansion, in that the various layers of her skirt in a way rewrite the widow’s apron in Lavin’s story. Like the hen, the doll is used as a weapon: in her anger the widow hits Packy with the “carcass of the fowl” “in blow after blow” (Lavin 1964, 110). In the same pattern of speech, Maria “catch(es) the doll by her feet” like a hen and hits George “in blow after blow” (O’Donnell 2008; 59). O’Donnell magnifies Maria’s anger and powerlessness adding “with venom”, which replaces the “conflict of irritation and love” (Lavin 1964; 113) Lavin sheds light on in her story.

Lavin’s authorial intrusion into the story develops in three moments. The first paragraph draws attention to the story as story, while the lengthy intervention at the end of the first version of Packy’s story openly considers writing and creativity. In the use of her first-person pronoun Lavin gives way to a ludic impetus, on the ground that “it is sometimes easier to invent than to remember accurately”, something at the roots of the creative art of storytelling and gossip (108). Lavin is thus shedding light on the text’s conscious storytelling as well as on spontaneous oral storytelling using the direct address to the reader using the second-person pronoun (“you”). This also warns the reader not to trust her voice too much, but to take the new story only as the product of imagination. Likewise, the deictic tenet “now” reminds the reader of the text’s artificiality of narrative discourse:

After all what I am about to tell you is no more of a fiction than what I have already told, and I lean no heavier now upon your credulity than, with your consent,

I did in the first instance (108).

A metacommentary marks the opening of the second version of the story: “In many respects, the new story is the same as the old” (108), “it begins in the same way too” (109). Once again, Lavin resorts to repetition with a sort of cinematic strategy in which characters and events are observed from a distance:

There is the widow, grazing her cow.
There she is, fussing over Packy in the morning
There she is in the evening
And there too ... is the old laboring man (109).

This conscious intrusion highlights the story that has just been told as a protoworld that is going to be rewritten and subverted. And in a further elaboration of the story’s rewriting, Mary O’Donnell follows the steps of the structural organization of Lavin’s story, reproducing the same pattern of speech and repetition, but emphasizing the colloquial tone: “So, let me tell you what I myself think” and “to be honest, in some respects the new story is the same as the old” (O’Donnell 2008; 58).

In the final part, Mary Lavin gives an explicit judgment of the story content (Peterson 84), claiming that “all our actions have this double quality about them; this possibility of alternative” (Lavin 1964; 113) and argues in favour of accepting one’s own fate: “no matter how tragic that may be, it is better than the tragedy we bring upon ourselves” (113). Mary O’Donnell seems to play with this open moralistic didacticism, since in her rewriting she follows the same pattern as Lavin’s conclusion, but fragments it into four separate paragraphs, ostensibly to underline the potential conflict implicit in everyday actions. O’Donnell also rewrites beyond Lavin’s conclusion adding a couple of colloquial sentences that make direct reference to the didactic strain in Lavin’s story:

We witness daily on our television screens tragedy and needless tragedy. Even so, we learn nothing. (O’Donnell 2008; 63)

Interestingly, O’Donnell distinguishes between the two versions of her stories defining the first one “tragedy” (56), with its lamentable and disastrous outcome, and the alternative ending “drama” (62) in its intense conflict of forces. This choice involves not only a double ending but also a double characterisation and impact of each version. Interestingly, the second version is “dramatic” in the sense of related to drama in the sense that conversation is magnified and the exchange of words becomes more and more pressing as Maria involves George in a fight with words. She destroys her son and her relationship with him through words and language.

The attention drawn to tragedy in the conclusion to both stories highlights the widow and Maria respectively as “writers” of their own tragedy. And in this respect Mary O’Donnell develops in her own way some implicit allusion to the act of writing or rewriting in Lavin’s story. In fact, while waiting for Packy, the widow “set herself to raking the gravel outside the gate” thus raising “a cloud of dust” (Lavin 1964, 109). If the cloud of dust creates confusion and darkness, the rake is an equivalent or substitute, an allomorph, for a pen, which is

emblematic for the widow as a potential destroyer of the previous story and a rewriter of the same story.

In Mary O'Donnell's story, a different, but analogous image can be interpreted as a metaphor for rewriting, for making and unmaking. When hitting George with the doll, Maria sees her life "unravelling like a huge sweater in which there had been one tiny tear" and "the yarn of her life is "unraveling and falling into a piece of nothingness" (O'Donnell 2008; 59). The unravelling yarn recalls the familiar expression "to spurn a yarn", which highlights the attention the double stories cast on the act of writing and telling conflicting stories.

Mary O'Donnell's rewriting of a famous Lavin story is an interesting experiment in fiction following the steps of a well-known text. Transposition, expansion, compression, direct quotation are all part of a ludic enterprise based on intertextuality playing with the self-consciousness of writing. By doing so, O'Donnell appropriates a well-known story to discover new ways to create self-conscious work, thus following, in retelling, the postmodern tendency toward self-reflexivity. If the act of "borrowing", so to speak, is explicit, her updating of a traditional Lavin short story highlights how the symbiotic relationship with the past responds to the creative need of transformation and re-generation, to "make it new". The host-guest relationship between the two texts underlies self-conscious creativity and in the "connection with the writers of the past" (O'Donnell 2009, 158) O'Donnell's "Story of Maria's Son" reflects Lavin's desire to consider and speculate on the art of writing and fiction. After all, what both Lavin and O'Donnell have told their readers is just a fiction, with the authority of fiction.

Works Cited

- Bowen, Zack. *Mary Lavin*. Lewisburg, London: Bucknell University Press, 1975.
- Deane, Seamus. "Mary Lavin". *Ireland Today*, No. 981, October 1981. 14-16.
- D'hoker, Elke, ed. "Introduction". In Elke D'hoker, ed. *Mary Lavin*, Sallins: Irish Academic Press, 2013, 4-9.
- _____. *Irish Women Writers and the Modern Short Story*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Doležel, Lubomir. *Heterocosmica. Fiction and Possible Worlds.*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.
- Fogarty, Anne. "'Only on the Edge': A Conversation with Mary O'Donnell". In Maria Elena Jaime de Pablos, ed., *Giving Shape to the Moment. The Art of Mary O'Donnell: Poet, Novelist and Short Story Writer*. Oxford, Bern: Peter Lang, 2018. 153-72.
- Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsests*. English translation by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Print, 1997.
- Hand, Derek. "A touch of Class". Review of Mary O'Donnell, *Storm over Belfast*, *The Irish Times*, May 24, 2008.
- Harmon, Maurice. "Mary Lavin: Moralism of the Heart". In Barbara Hayley, Christopher Murray, eds., *Ireland and France. A Bountiful Friendship*. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1992. 107-23.
- Ingman, Heather. *A History of the Irish Short Story*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Kelly, A.A. *Mary Lavin. Quiet Rebel*. Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1980.
- Lavin, Mary. "The Widow's Son", in *The Stories of Mary Lavin*, Vol. 1, London: Constable, 1964. 105-13.
- , "The Widow's Son". In *In a Café*. A new selection by Elizabeth Walsh Peavoy. Dublin: Town House, 1995. 227-38.
- Meszaros, Patricia. "Woman as Artist: The Fiction of Mary Lavin". In *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction*. 21,1, Fall 1982. 39-54.
- Moloney, Caitriona, Thompson, Helen. *Irish Women Speak Out. Voices from the Field*, Syracuse:

- Syracuse University Press, (2003).
- Ní Dhuibhne, Éilís. *The Pale Gold of Alaska*. Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2000.
- James H. O'Brien. "Dream and Reality". Review of Mary Lavin, *A Likely Story*. *Hibernia*, Sept. 1967, 24.
- O'Donnell, Mary. *Unlegendary Heroes*. Cliffs of Moher: Salmon Publishing, 1998.
- . "The Story of Maria's Son". *Storm over Belfast*. Dublin: New Island, 2008. 46-63.
- . "Irish Women and Writing: An Overview of the Journey from Imagination into Print, 1980-2008". Manuela Palacios and Laura Lojo eds., *Writing Bonds*. Oxford, Bern, Berlin: Peter Lang, 2009, pp. 155-174.
- Peterson, Richard. *Mary Lavin*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978.
- Somerville-Arjat, Gilleán, Wilson, Rebecca E. *Sleeping with Monsters*. Conversations with Scottish and Irish Women Poets. Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1990.
- Stevens, Julie Anne. "Mary Lavin (1912-1996): A Tribute". *Irish Journal of Feminist Studies*, Vol. 1, Issue 2, 1996. 25-34.
- . "The Mystery of 'The Yellow Beret': Mary Lavin and the Art of Short Fiction". In Elke D'hoker,, ed. *Mary Lavin*, Sallins: Irish Academic Press, 2013. 169-86.
- Weekes, Ann Owens. "Figuring the Mother in Contemporary Irish Fiction". In Liam Harte, Michael Parker, eds. *Contemporary Irish Fiction. Themes, Tropes, Theories*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000.
- Wymard, Ellie. "MFA Notes from the Director". <http://gradstudies.carlow.edu/creative/notes.html>, (last accessed Dec 3, 2010).