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Chapter 17

Single Women in Story and Society

Anne Byrne

The family has been central to Irish culture and society evincing an anxious preoccupation with marital and familial relationships. Familism is associated with patriarchal systems in which the family is a valued social institution, supporting traditional performances of gender and sexuality in heterosexual marriage. A thorough understanding of the relations of ‘blood and marriage’ was crucial to a 1930s American anthropological study of Irish family and community life.1 Arranged marriage or ‘match-making’ was still in evidence, ensuring the transfer of the family name and farm property from one generation to the next, advancing the status of the newly connected families, while developing new kin networks. Though families made provision for or educated offspring who neither inherited land or received a dowry, many were forced through economic necessity to leave home to make a living elsewhere. This was an era of emigration of single women and men, high rates of singleness in the population, late age of marriage and high fertility within marriage – distinctive patterns largely ascribed to impartible farm inheritance, a ‘stem family system’ in which one child would inherit, marry and produce the next generation. Given the strict control of sexuality and sexual relations among the unmarried, the strictures of a life of enforced celibacy was as significant as economic factors in motivating emigration. For ‘bachelors’ and ‘spinsters’ who remained at home, opportunities for sexual relationships were limited, despite or perhaps because of, the advances of ‘modernisation’, bringing with it changing and differing expectations of marital intimacy, dependency relations, gender equality for example. The new state set a marriage ‘bar’ from the 1930s, sending out signals to women that waged work and family making should not and could not be combined. But women also understood that education and meaningful work could be a basis for self-fulfillment, though at some cost to becoming a wife and mother. Intimacy and independence are set at odds.

John B Keane’s ‘The Chastitute’, captures the growing despair and decline of a ‘love hungry farmer’.2 John Bosco is a ‘marriageable bachelor’ with land, unable to find a woman who might marry him. A familiar figure, but an account of his life and how he might be reconciled to his bachelorhood is rarely heard. In a society in which ‘marriage avoidance’ is a strategy for increasing prosperity, the unmarried received poorer treatment. Sociological studies from the 1960s place bachelors as marginalised, at risk and unhappy.3 However the marginalisation thesis is challenged in an ethnographic study that argues that identification with a masculine stereotype of men as ‘tough, confident and self-reliant’ goes some way in adapting to bachelorhood in rural Clare.4 Compared to bachelor men, how
are single, never married women portrayed in sociological accounts and literary fiction? How do their gendered stereotypes serve them?

Sociological models of rural communities in the 1970s placed men—including bachelors—at the centre of their analyses, married women and children at the outer perimeters, with unmarried women hovering at the limits of community. Women’s lower social and economic status circumscribed their future options. To be unmarried without children was undesirable and there was little or no positive cultural support for the single life. Young women lived a life of ‘unrelieved drudgery’ in which they had to work as hard as their mothers on the farm in return for their keep. There were few comforts and fewer opportunities for socialising away from family and community.

What are the points of contact or distance between empirical studies and fiction? How are single women portrayed? Two particular stories of single women, authored by men, are examined here to consider fictional stereotypes of singlehood and womanhood. How they inspire, edit or illuminate women’s lives is of some interest.

**Literary Spinsters**

William Trevor’s short story *The Ballroom of Romance* set in the 1950s, concerns a turning point in Bridie’s life, a single woman caring for her widowed father, labouring on the family farm, tending to cows and hens. Although her father still called her a girl, Bridie was thirty-six. She was tall and strong; the skin of her fingers and palms were stained, and harsh to touch…since childhood she’d torn away at the rough scotch grass that grew each spring among her father’s mangolds and sugar beet; since childhood she’d harvested potatoes in August… wind had toughened the flesh of her face, sun had browned it; her neck and nose were lean, her lips touched with early wrinkles. Every Saturday for twenty years, Bridie cycles seven miles to the dance, dreaming of a boy she once loved, now hoping for a man that would do. ‘Dano Ryan would have done, Bridie often thought, because he was a different kind of bachelor, he had a lonely look about him as if he was tired of being on his own… Dano Ryan would have done because she felt he wouldn’t mind coming to live in the farmhouse while her one-legged father was still about the place.’ Bridie nurtures quiet hope of relationship and fantasizes about Dano sitting at the table with her father, eating a meal she has cooked, watching them both as they set out to work on the farm while she creates a comfortable home. The night of the dance, Bridie realises that Mrs Griffin ‘was arranging to marry him’, the widow woman, with whom Ryan lodged. She wants to weep, to let others know how she feels about the loss of love, the death of her mother and the mould of her life as her father’s carer. The sympathetic attention and comfort of others is not available to Bridie. She wishes that Dano would ‘look at her in his decent way and to stroke with his road-mender’s fingers the backs of her hands.’ Her dignity, stoicism and dutiful loyalty to her father, work to conceal her feelings, stop.
her tears and silence her voice.

The younger women selectively pursue eligible men, avoiding the three middle aged bachelors, who ‘…were wedded already, to stout and whiskey and laziness, to three old mothers somewhere up in the hills.’ Contempt is expressed for Madge Dowling, who ‘should accept her condition – her age, her squint and poor complexion – and not make herself ridiculous going out after men.’ In seeing herself as others perceive Madge, ‘…dancing on beyond her time’, Bridie appraises her future. On his mother’s death, Bowser Egan, having spent his inheritance on drink, would come looking for her. She would marry him, a more rational choice perhaps than indicated by the final line of the story, ‘because it would be lonesome being by herself in the farmhouse.’

Trevor’s single woman is restricted by her place in the social system, by her familial obligations and by her performance of conventional womanhood. In the story, Bridie does not have a surname of her own. Her conversation is polite and respectful, her inner feelings are kept in check, an acquiescent victim of circumstances. There is no opportunity given to her to speak out against the social norms that valorise marriage. There is no event in the story that might query the social blaming of single people for their singlehood. There is no moment for Bridie in which she might consider a meaningful life as a single woman. If spinsterhood was an acceptable alternative to marriage, perhaps its ‘deviant’ status might not have had such a strong pull.

‘The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne’ by Brian Moore, begins with Judith, a woman in her early 40s, settling into another, cheaper, boarding house in Belfast of the 1950s.7 Her means are meager, having a modest legacy from her aunt, Judith teaches piano lessons to a dwindling number of students and economises by rigorous management of her appetite. Her friends are few; Edie another single woman, ill in a nursing home, and Moira who is married. Judith presents herself as a woman ‘rejected’ by men, ashamed of her singlehood but who hopes to marry someday. In the new boarding house, there might be somebody ‘charming’. Looking in the mirror she sees herself as a desirable woman, ‘(h)er gaze deceiving, transforming her to her imaginings, changed the contour of her sallow-skinned face, skillfully re-fashioning her long pointed nose … Her dark eyes, eyes which skittered constantly in imagined fright, became wide, soft, luminous. Her frame, plain as a cheap clothes rack, filled now with soft curves…’

Judith becomes enamored with James Madden, a widower, home from America, looking for a new start in life and business. Unsure of his first impressions of her, Judith’s vulnerability claims her. ‘Alone with this lonely stranger, she waited for his fumbled excuses, his departure…He would see her shyness, her stiffness. And it would frighten him, he would remember he was alone with her. He would listen politely to whatever inanity she could
manage to get out and then he would see the hysteria in her eyes, the hateful hot flush in her cheeks. And he would go as all men had gone before him. Judith is bound by middle-class convention, by appearances, by religious observation and by dutiful obligation to the memory of her aunt whom she looked after. Madden mistakenly believes that Judith is a wealthy woman and is attentive. She responds, believing he would soon propose marriage. Marriage was the opportunity to escape ‘… to go off, off to something better, something that might lead to something wonderful.’ Realising that Judith’s wealth is illusory, Madden rejects her. She turns to the comfort of alcohol and her final unraveling begins. Having lost faith in the Church and in her confessor who does not listen to her, she is alone. To Moira and her family, she is an object of pity. Evicted from the boarding house for her drinking, she speaks the truth of her life to Moira, telling her ‘everything is finished’, her life has no longer any meaning. She tells of her twenty-year wait for marriage, how Mr Right changes from tall, dark and handsome to ‘… anybody, anybody who might be eligible’ and after that, anybody will do. ‘You’re up for auction, a country auction, where the auctioneer stands up and says what am I bid?… and somebody comes along, laughable and you take him. If you can get him. Because its either that or back on the shelf for you. Back to your furnished room and your prayers. And your hopes.’ Turned down by Madden, she would accept him still. As a single woman, she is unwanted, rejected by society, ‘too old’, ‘too ugly’, ‘left on the shelf’. Judith feels the stigma of her singlehood. In these fictional portrayals of Bridie and Judith, the only possible flight from singleness is through marriage. Failure to marry is failure to claim adulthood. Judith at least is given the opportunity of speech. ‘What am I doing with my life? I ask you….A single girl with no kin, what am I doing? O Moira, you always were the lucky one, a husband and children around you, you’ll never know what it’s like to be me.’ Fiction such as this brings us closer to understanding the bite of conformity and difference, the personal and social effects of stigma and deviance and the consequences of loosing one’s entitlement to choose. Framed around the conflict of single identity and woman identity, the social norms of marriage and motherhood dominate these stories.

How to be single, how to talk about singleness, how to respond to the perception of others is a complicated business as is any portrayal of the single life. Like Judith and Bridie, lifelong singlehood was a way of life for a large number of people in an era of limited opportunities for women. The economic dependence of women on men was the norm and the framing of womanhood through marriage and family a national endeavor. The flight from singleness into marriage was filled with urgency; to be married was respectable, to be single was second best. The failure to marry and mother was felt as a personal failure and a source of shame. Despite the knowledge of the effect of social factors – lack of a suitable partner, lack of means to marry, the need to care for others or the need to earn money, single people were blamed for being single and made to feel that their singleness was a
mark of difference. Against this frame, the fictional portraits are not inaccurate. Moore and Trevor write about the emotional weight of singlehood; readers may have been more empathic to the single life as a consequence. Nonetheless the hopeful possibility of living an acceptable life as a single woman is written out of these stories.

The recognition that the duties and strictures of Catholic marriage, obedience to husband and selfless motherhood, might not be the best option for a ‘modern girl’ surfaces later in Irish fiction. For example, in Maeve Kelly’s *Florrie’s Girls*, Cos cedes the farm to her brother, refuses marriage to a neighbor and emigrates, because there is a bigger world out there, filled with people, ideas, music and the opportunity to live life in a different pattern.8

**Sociological Analyses of Singleness**

Sociology and fiction may be more similar than different. However while fiction has the capacity to draw the reader close to the time and place of a story world, become acquainted with characters, their thoughts and perceptions, the intent of the author is to tell a good story. Sociology is also concerned with stories of people’s lives and relationships. But it is sociology’s questioning of assumptions about how the world works, its capacity for reflection on the ways things are, combined with a systematic approach to gathering and interpreting evidence about society and culture that gives it a different intent and designates it as a human science. Consider the work of sociologists concerned with the organisation and structure of family life across time and cultures. The ideal of ‘family’ and its durable real world manifestations can be far apart, as Pierre Bourdieu points out.9 Regardless, the ‘family’ represents a particular vision of a stable social world, prescribing relationships between women and men, children and parents. Family relationships based on love and acts of generosity rather than calculation, become the internal (mental) and external (social) plumb line against which all other relationships are evaluated. Individual interests are identified with collective interests; to question the norm of family life requires courage. Bourdieu described the experiences of single women pressurised to conform as ‘social suffering’, evident in the story of Bridie and Judith. In a sociological study of singleness in 1990s Ireland, Cara expresses the difficulty of accepting single identity.

I would love … if being single was OK. If society would allow people to be single … that must come from in here first and I probably have a conditioning that makes it difficult even for me to allow single to be OK. So I can’t accept it myself. (Cara, 39 years) (10).
There are more terms for single women than men, indicating a differential access to power and control. The bachelor is always ‘eligible’, but can choose not to marry; the ‘spinster’ by contrast is no longer ‘eligible’.

‘Maiden aunt’ places a woman within a family and sexual system. Similarly ‘Old Maid’ combines servitude with celibacy. ‘Sceach sa bearna’ an Irish term for stopgap or make shift substitute, describes an unmarried woman as a helpmate who labours in the home of her married sibling. ‘Bachelorette’, the female diminutive of the more positive appellation of bachelor, refers to a transitory and exuberant moment in a woman’s life, perhaps. The category ‘single’ is problematic referring to the unmarried, divorced, separated, widowed, cohabiters with and without children. The category can be further complicated by sexuality, race or class; for example, in a familial society, is it more difficult to be heterosexual and single or lesbian/gay and single, both being some distance from the norm? Researchers compare the married to the unmarried, the ever married to the never married, the always single to the single again. New terms are devised to lessen the inherent normativity in the categories; for example ‘solo woman’ or ‘socially single’ may have less conceptual bias than unpartnered, unmarried or single.

Currently close to half the Irish population over 15 is ‘statistically single’ (never married) but many will legally marry or live in same or opposite sex couple relationships for most of their lives. To be ‘socially single’ indicates that one is currently on one’s own, not part of a couple, though this might change. To be ‘sociologically single’ depends on whether singleness is defined as temporary or permanent, voluntary or involuntary. Voluntary temporary singles postpone marriage for other activities (education, career, personal goals), voluntary stable singles choose to be single and wish to remain so (widowed, religious orders, carers), involuntary temporary singles are actively seeking a partner to marry while involuntary stable singles would have liked to marry but the opportunity has passed or not available. These positions are translated into common usage as ‘single-and-looking’ (the majority) and ‘single-at-heart’ (a minority). People move in and out of singleness /coupled relationships across the life span and singleness can take on different meanings and weight as one ages. The personal and social significance of being single is further inflected by one’s personal dispositions, one’s relationship biography as much as the normative expectations of the cultural era in which we live out our lives. Nonetheless the word ‘single’ continues to carry a burden; the nature of this burden is worth thinking about.

Singleness is problematised in research, a popular topic of empirical inquiry and guarded explanation. Advice on how to live a meaningful life as a single person is a popular genre in Ireland. The possibilities for happiness, intimacy have been colonised by ‘coupledom’, with little consideration given to the satisfaction that can arise from close friendships, sibling relationships or the pleasure that comes from simply being alone. Conversely, assuming that
those in partnerships are happier than those who are not partnered has been scientifically challenged, with study participants reporting an increase in life satisfaction following the dissolution of an unhappy marriage. In Irish fiction, much concerned with the harsh portrayal of women’s lives, married women are portrayed as far from happy. Consider the extent of the accommodations to endure constricting marriages from one end of the century to another – author Kate O’Brien’s character Caroline Lanigan in the novel ‘Without my Cloak’ whose husband is oblivious to her sexual desire but whom she cannot leave, is one such example, as is the betrayed female protagonist in Anne Enright’s The Portable Virgin.

We learn much about how a society works by the effects of normativity on human relationships and life choices. Normative values express collective judgments about what is desirable, shaping how society ought to be structured, encouraging attachments to particular institutions and practices, discouraging others. Normative statements are prescriptive concerning gender, sexuality, race, class, age, ability, ethnicity or ‘marital’ status for example. We are largely unaware of the ideological force of normativity; in the interest of solidarity, we abide by social norms with little reflection on their regulatory effects. When we ‘bump up’ against a norm we begin to understand its constraints. A single women who finds herself explaining once again to a stranger or relative at a wedding, why she is not married, is someone experiencing being different to the norm and is required to provide an explanation for it.

Normative expectations are attached to strong social identities that flow from marital status; it is expected that a woman of a certain age ought to be married and if married, a mother. Normative identities are valued while non-normative identities can be targets for social stigma and self-stigma. Erving Goffman describes how stigma works to reinforce the status quo, distinguishing stigmatized from stigmatisers. Goffman identifies three types of stigma, personal, physical and social. The possession of an undesirable attribute is enough to ‘spoil’ one’s social identity. Depending on how attached one is to the more valued social identity, persons who are stigmatised may experience a loss in social status, rejection, discrimination or worse and can suffer from lowered self-esteem and depression.

An analysis of midlife development data of 3,000 adults (25–74 years) in 1995 in the US indicated unmarried men and women were more likely to report inter-personal discriminatory treatment than married persons. Single women reported being treated with less respect, reporting having been more harassed and threatened compared to married women. People who were never married and unpartnered, felt the stigma of being single, more than the formerly married. Multiple studies of unmarried adults demonstrate the deleterious effects of inter-personal discrimination on one’s sense of self. The appraisals of other’s are especially significant to us. If one is
consistently regarded negatively, it is likely that these negative attitudes become part of one’s self-evaluation.

People whose social identities are ‘spoiled’, may work to adjust their identities in an effort to be acceptable to others or they may attempt to ‘pass’ as ‘normal’. To prevent further intrusiveness, a woman may wear a wedding ring when traveling alone to symbolically ‘pass’ as married. The ring itself is a status symbol, identifying oneself as a member of the preferred group.

Stigmatising attributes vary across cultures and eras, but stigma as a social process is ubiquitous and is linked to stereotyping. The targeted groups are perceived to be a disturbance to the social order and the beliefs that sustain it.

Negative generalisations of others can produce strong emotional responses and depend on whether the stigmatised person is perceived as in control of their circumstances or not. It is notoriously difficult to adjust stereotypical responses, despite new information or interaction with individual members of a stereotyped group. Stigma, stereotyping, negative (and positive) appraisals of others, point to the presence of powerful conventions at work in society and culture.

Arguably the stereotypes produced by society are themselves a form of fiction. The lonely and isolated spinster, the sexy single or the independent career minded woman, are examples of contradictory fictions that have to be navigated and negotiated by single women. This is no easy task for anybody seeking to combine independence and intimacy. Research studies suggest that single women have to work hard to avoid being stereotyped and stigmatised, particularly in familistic societies such as the United States, Britain and Ireland. While younger single women are immune from negative appraisals, once the local age of marriage has passed, perceptions become increasingly pejorative. Women are castigated if perceived as responsible for their unmarried state or are actively choosing to be single; explaining the majority preference for presenting oneself as ‘single-and-looking’ perhaps? The preoccupation with heterosexual coupling, marriage or ‘matrimania’ and the constant devaluing of the single status, is, according to the American sociologist Bella dePaulo, a form of ‘singlism’, prevalent in society and scientific investigations of single people. ‘Singlism’ is the stereotyping, stigmatising, and discrimination against people who are single, despite survey evidence that suggests that single people and married people are more alike than different.16

The Solo Woman

*Single Blessedness* was anonymously authored in 1852 with the subtitle *Or Single Ladies and Gentleman against the Slanders of the Pulpit, Press and Lecture Room*. It was written in response to ‘public scorn and odium by the
voice and pen’ for single people. The author asserts the right of single people to speak out and contest the representation of the ‘single class’ as a ‘lost race’ or ‘an inferior order of beings’. Written and performed more than a century and a half later, Singlehood by Una McKevitt, is a play based on 50 interviews with Irish ‘singletons’ that champion singlehood. This is a rare example in which personal experiences of being single are central to the dramatisation, and articulated in a public space. Chiming with contemporary research, autonomy and independence are highly valued, as is living alone. The word ‘freedom’ is repeated, freedom from being ‘in a crappy relationship’, freedom to ‘come and go as you want’, freedom to ‘do the dishes, clean up, wash your socks when you want’, freedom from being affected ‘by somebody else’s feelings and emotions’. Intimate relationships are considered but without compromising cherished independence. Rewriting the script of singlehood, accenting the positives and enabling single people’s voices to reach a wider audience, is a form of politics and may help to diminish singlism.

In a recent series ‘The Single Thing’ in The Irish Times, being single in contemporary Ireland was explored for older and younger singles, men and women, ever and never married, with and without children. While most of those interviewed were ‘single-and-looking’ with fewer ‘single-at-heart’, single stigma does not seem to be as prevalent. Single people feel less marginalised and more willing to speak out about the many ways to live as a single person. There is more acceptance now of living as a single person. Opportunities for education, paid work and economic independence, improved reproductive control combined with the ideological support of the women’s movement for sexual and economic equality, have benefited all women. The seismic shift in women’s lives in Ireland from the 1960s onwards, is part of the reason for the changes in attitudes to single women and men. As Lily comments

I could list at least two or three dozen women who are not married between the ages of thirty and fifty...I believe we were the kids of the sixties and we found a certain independence, not totally reliant on having appendages of a husband...there is a certain amount of independence among us...there is a certain belief in independence... (Lily, 43 years).

Lily neither wants to be an appendage nor to have one. Women are actively making different choices concerning marriage and motherhood that were not possible in the first half of the century. Single women are clearly not ‘anti-family’, providing much emotional and practical care for their own and other people’s families. Partnership status does not have the same significance as it once had; single women who ‘opt in’ to single motherhood are one such example, making a break between marriage and maternity. Contesting the cultural norm of the nuclear family based on heterosexual marriage, single
women develop deep attachments, family, friendship and sexual relationships, according to own desires and preferences. This distinguishes single women (the single-at-heart at least) from others. The picture that emerges from sociological research, is that while single women’s own responses to the single status varies across the life span, most are autonomous, independent, resourceful, resilient, well adjusted and happy with their lives. The ‘shadow of marriage’ is not as long as it used to be.

Those who are sympathetic to and have some insight into the lives of those who are stigmatised, achieve the status of ‘wise persons’, according to Goffman, providing support and encouragement for the ‘marginalised’. Single women themselves can be included in the ‘wise person’ category; evidence from research shows that those relationships that diminish or erode single autonomy and identity are carefully avoided, while those that support singleness are nurtured, demonstrating a capacity for creating new forms of interdependency. A recognition that womanhood is no longer ‘a one size fits all’ category but is variable and diverse is confirmed by evidence about single women’s lives in Ireland, the US and UK. We need more research about the actual realities of single women’s lives – historically and now - as well as more fictional accounts of the relational possibilities, values and choices that imaginatively stretch personal, social and political being. Irish women writers are challenging stereotypes and misconceptions of womanhood, troubling gender relations and crucially separating ‘woman’ from ‘nation’. An analysis of Irish (women’s) writing about single women would go some way to shortening the distance between Irish sociology and Irish Studies, a journey that has been initiated by Irish Women’s Studies feminist scholars. Perhaps placing ‘solo women’ central to imaginative writing or as narrators of their own lives may first have to be rehearsed on stage like the aforementioned ‘Singlehood’? More people are choosing to be ever single in Ireland, postponing marriage, dissolving marriages, and choosing to be un/never/married. Being happy with oneself and making self-determined choices not only enables ‘solo women’ to pursue the creative, practical and relational passions that animate a life, but may also inspire others to question the dominant version of pro-family ideology and the too narrow conceptions of womanhood, in a rapidly changing society. If we were to rewrite Bridie’s and Judith’s stories, might we too re-imagine them as ‘tough, confident and self-reliant’? What else might we write?

Notes

3. For an assessment of sociological studies on single men and women in the first half of the twentieth century, see Anne Byrne, “Single


12. Greitmeyer investigates the robustness of the single stereotype based on personality characteristics and finds it wanting; see Tobias Greitemeyer “Stereotypes of singles: are singles what we think?” European Journal of Social Psychology, 39 No 3, 2009, p.368-383.


16. For research on single people in the US see Bella dePaulo, Singled Out: How Singles are Stereotyped, Stigmatised and Ignored and Still Live Happily Ever After (New York: St Martin’s Griffin, 2006).


21. For a UK study see Roona Simpson, Contemporary Spinsterhood in Britain: Gender Partnership Status and Social Change (Germany: VDM Verlag, 2005).
