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CHAPTER 6

Writing Working-Class Irish Women

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This chapter offers an overview and an analysis of the representation of working-class women in Irish urban writing. It makes reference to depictions of working-class Dublin women, as provided by such well-known literary figures as Seán O'Casey, James Joyce and, more recently, Roddy Doyle. However, challenging the oft-rehearsed equation of Ireland's working class with the country's capital city, it also mentions works set in Cork, Limerick, Galway, Kilkenny and Donegal. Moreover, taking an island-wide focus, it discusses some Derry- and Belfast-based writings. In *Writing Ireland's Working Class*, Michael Pierse notes the 'plethora of male-authored texts about working-class women's lives' in Ireland.[1] Ruth Sherry, comparing these writings favourably on gender grounds with fictional accounts of the English working class, asserts that 'Irish men write with considerable understanding of working women.'[2] While acknowledging the importance of male-authored texts in constructing, reinforcing and sometimes challenging key tropes in the representation of working-class Irish women, this chapter draws attention to the many female-authored texts that feature disadvantaged women living in Irish urban centres, from the late nineteenth-century 'slum fiction' of Fannie Gallaher to more recent works by Paula Meehan, Rita Ann Higgins, Christina Reid and Mary Morrissy. This chapter addresses the following questions. What aesthetic and ideological functions do working-class women serve in Irish literary texts? How do these texts treat the issue of working-class motherhood? How do they depict women's work, whether unpaid household work or waged labour? Is working-class life contextualised, in these writings, within existing power

[1] Michael Pierse, *Writing Ireland's Working Class: Dublin after O'Casey* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), p. 110.

[2] Ruth Sherry, 'The Irish Working Class in Fiction', in *The British Working-Class Novel in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Jeremy Hawthorn (London: Edward Arnold, 1984), pp. 111–24 (p. 120).

structures? How do the women that they feature respond to class and gender inequalities?

The figure of the overburdened and under-resourced mother valiantly struggling to look after and provide for her children dominated twentieth-century depictions of working-class Irish women, particularly in male-authored texts. Terence MacSwiney's *The Holocaust* (1910), James Stephens's *Hunger: A Dublin Story* (1918), Seán O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* (1924), Christy Brown's *My Left Foot* (1954), Frank O'Connor's *An Only Child* (1961), Paul Smith's *The Countrywoman* (1961) and James Plunkett's *Strumpet City* (1969) all feature a harried yet dutiful mother/nurturer. This familiar figure has served a number of useful functions. In some narratives, details provided of the day-to-day reality of maintaining a dwelling and family on a working-class wage offer a strong critique of the economic and political status quo. As Caitriona Clear states, 'the tenement-dwelling mother struggling to keep her family alive was the strongest indictment of the greed of property and the indifference of legislators.'[3] Thus in Plunkett's leftist-aligned novel, *Strumpet City*, Mary Fitzpatrick's attempts during the 1913 labour dispute to keep her home intact and her children safe and healthy are to the fore. The novel also tells of an unnamed mother whose children are presumed dead after the collapse of a Dublin tenement building: the 'young woman whose dark hair was matted with blood' was 'barely conscious and kept saying over and over again: "The children … the children".'[4] The cosy collusion of capitalism and the state against the interests of the working class is revealed when one character tells another that the owner of the tenement had pulled political strings to ensure that the unstable building passed its last safety check (447). MacSwiney's short play, *The Holocaust*, which like *Strumpet City* is set against the backdrop of a bitter strike and lockout, features a Cork-based slum-dweller, Polly Mahony, who faces the loss of the last of her children to tuberculosis. The painstaking strategies Polly employs on behalf of her remaining family are disclosed in the account given of her attempts to eke out a priest's charity: by buying two half-quarters of butter rather than one pat: 'we get the turn of the scales with each half-quarter – and that's as much as would butter a piece of bread.'[5]

[3] Catriona Clear, *Women of the House: Women's Household Work in Ireland, 1926–1961* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000), pp. 2–3.

[4] James Plunkett, *Strumpet City* (London: Arrow, [original edn 1969] 1990), p. 447; further references to this edition are cited parenthetically in the text.

[5] Terence MacSwiney, *The Holocaust: A Tragedy in One Act* (1910). Terence MacSwiney Papers, University College Dublin Archives, P48b/296, p. 3; further references to this edition are cited parenthetically in the text.

In Smith's *The Countrywoman*, set predominantly during the Irish Civil War, the figure of the impoverished mother doing her utmost to care for her children serves a different purpose. *The Countrywoman* tells the story of Molly Baines, a woman originally from rural County Wicklow who has spent the past eighteen years in Dublin, living in 'two rooms in Kelly's Lane'.[6] Always behaving honourably towards others, Mrs Baines is liked and respected by Dublin-born neighbours who still view her as an exotic outsider. A Protestant benefactor, pleased to note 'the beautifully neat darns in [Mrs Baines's son's] navy-blue gansey and the threadbare well-patched breeches that were obviously homemade but done with much care and attention', concludes that the child's mother is a worthy candidate for charity (105). But Mrs Baines's conscientious efforts to keep her children fed and clothed are impeded by a drunken and abusive husband who is not beyond maliciously ripping their children's clothes to shreds and slashing their shoes with a razor (179–80). Through a heart-breaking account of Mrs Baines's repeated attempts to build a home for her children after each of her husband's destructive visits, the novel offers a damning appraisal of a church whose representatives have instructed this woman to not only 'stay with her husband', but to 'forgive' him for his violent treatment of her and their children (176). That Pat Baines is aware of the complicity of the Catholic Church in the physical and psychological abuse that he inflicts on his wife and children is suggested by his insistence that they get down on their knees and pray after a particularly savage beating: 'Mrs Baines began to pray, the words issuing in gasps through the new gap where teeth had been' (168).

The diligent yet struggling working-class mother has also functioned in Irish writing to underpin a critique of 'abstract' politics. O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* is a case in point. Pierse asserts that 'women's plight in working-class life is a key, abiding theme of [O'Casey's] *oeuvre*.'[7] Nicholas Grene summarises the oft-rehearsed gender aspect of the 'Dublin trilogy' as follows: 'The men boast and blow, but it is the women who show the real courage of suffering and endurance.'[8] As Grene states, the supposed 'cult of the woman' that can be found in the three plays – *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926) – has facilitated a commonplace acceptance of O'Casey as a

[6] Paul Smith, *The Countrywoman* (London: Penguin, [original edn 1961] 1989), p. 1; further references to this edition are cited parenthetically in the text.

[7] Pierse, *Writing Ireland's Working Class*, p. 57.

[8] Nicholas Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama: Plays in Context from Boucicault to Friel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 125.

playwright with feminist leanings.[9] It is certainly true that in these plays women, and in particular mothers, tend to be depicted in a positive light. The most fully central and most fully heroic of O'Casey's women is Juno Boyle in *Juno and the Paycock*, a play that like *The Countrywoman* is set during the Civil War. Juno is hard-working, resilient and caring. As she herself acknowledges, she is crucial to the survival of the dwelling-space and the family: 'Who has kep' th' home together for the past few years – only me?'; 'I don't know what any o' yous ud do without your ma.'[10] Her working-class pragmatics, so essential to the preservation of home and family, are pitted in the play against the principled political stances adopted by her children. She is grounded in the day-to-day struggle to keep her family sheltered and fed. Her children, in contrast, are in thrall to a high-flown rhetoric that is revealed in the play to have very little bearing on the life choices that they make. Through the figure of Juno, *Juno and the Paycock* forms an opposition between the 'real' instincts of maternal love and the illusory nature of political commitment, whether that commitment is to anti-treaty republicanism or to the labour movement.

All three sets of narratives – those which employ the figure of the impoverished yet diligent working-class mother to expose the injustices of the economic and political status quo, those in which this figure offers a strong indictment of the Catholic Church, and those in which it provides a critique of 'abstract' politics – rely on an idealised and essentialised concept of motherhood. The more fervently the reader believes that Mary Fitzpatrick in *Strumpet City* and Polly Mahony in *The Holocaust* are 'good' mothers who are doing everything in their power to care for their children, the more successful are the condemnations offered in these texts of the prevailing economic and political forces. Moreover, the extent of the reader's outrage at the collapse of the tenement building in Plunkett's novel is largely reliant on her/his emotional response to the predicament of the unnamed mother whose children are missing. This emotional response is in turn dependent on that reader's internalisation of an ideology of maternity which suggests that the connection between mother and child is both precious and unique. In *The Countrywoman*, Mrs Baines's tireless efforts

[9] Ibid., p. 125. See, for example, Marianne Peyronnet's claim that in these early plays O'Casey pre-empted the poststructuralist feminism that emerged in France in the 1970s. Marianne Peyronnet, 'Was O'Casey a Feminist Playwright?', *Times Change: Quarterly Political and Cultural Review*, 12 (1997/8), pp. 23–6.

[10] Seán O'Casey, *Three Dublin Plays: The Shadow of a Gunman* [1923], *Juno and the Paycock* [1924], *The Plough and the Stars* [1926] (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), pp. 138, 71–2; further references to this edition are cited parenthetically in the text.

on behalf of her children are contrasted to the church's careless treatment of its flock, including Mrs Baines herself, whom it condemns to a life of deprivation and abuse. Mrs Baines's innate maternal nature is, therefore, key to the narrative's critique of the Catholic Church. Thus, we are told that her decision to have yet another child that she cannot afford is based not only on her knowledge of the church's rigid stance on abortion, but on her own 'inordinate love of life, and children in particular' (186). She later convinces Queenie Mullen to get married and have the baby she is carrying, notwithstanding Queenie's assertion that she would rather remain single and abort the child (200–6). Therefore, although *The Countrywoman*'s harsh portrayal of the Catholic Church contributed to the novel being banned upon publication, the story of the 'good' mother, Molly Baines, is underpinned by the same ideology of maternity that the church drew on in its celebration of idealised motherhood. The opposition established in O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* between illusory politics and pragmatic realism is equally reliant on essentialist constructions of maternity. As Susan Cannon Harris states in *Gender and Modern Irish Drama*, 'Juno's connection to what is "real" is established and sold through O'Casey's appeal to the purported universality of maternal instinct.'[11] By offering his audience the one thing that he knows they will unquestionably accept as 'authentic', a mother's love, O'Casey seeks to 'break the connection between authenticity and the body of the slain political martyr' who dies for an abstraction.[12] In short, in this play O'Casey employs an ideology of maternity to undo the power of political ideology.

While the careworn but diligent mother/nurturer is the dominant female figure in narratives that draw on Irish working-class life, some texts offer alternative or opposing versions of working-class motherhood. Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1996) features a 'defeated' mother who sometimes opts to remain in bed rather than face yet another day of deprivation and drudgery.[13] Roddy Doyle's *The Snapper* (1990) is focalised predominantly through Sharon and her father, but Sharon's mother, who veers between looking 'tired' and looking 'very tired', is a shadowy reminder of the toll that working-class motherhood can take.[14] Permanent exhaustion ensures that neither Angela McCourt nor Veronica Rabbitte is capable of playing

[11] Susan Cannon Harris, *Gender and Modern Irish Drama* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), p. 198.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes* (London: Flamingo, [1996] 1997), p. 1.
[14] Roddy Doyle, *The Snapper*, in *The Barrytown Trilogy* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1992), pp. 141–340 (pp. 145, 146).

a significant role in their children's lives. By contrast, Mary Makebelieve's mother in James Stephens's *The Charwoman's Daughter* (1912) seeks to maintain an influence in her daughter's life that is far more suited to the relationship between a mother and a much younger child. The ardent version of mothering that she employs infantilises Mary, leaving her vulnerable to the policeman who seeks to control her. Paula Spencer, in Roddy Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996), admits to having sometimes bought alcohol with money that should have been spent on food for her children.[15] The portrayal of Marie Damian in Lee Dunne's *Does your Mother?* (1970) echoes that of the 'good' working-class mother found in texts like *Strumpet City*, but it is soon revealed that she is an occasional prostitute, only one of whose six children was fathered by her husband, now deceased. Fannie Gallaher's *Katty the Flash: A Mould of Dublin Mud* (1880), one of the earliest examples of Irish urban fiction, is centred on an impoverished woman who, notwithstanding the recent death of her daughter, continues to divide her time between 'the streets, the whiskey-shop, the police-court, and the prison'.[16] Paula Meehan's *Cell* (2000) and Heno Magee's *Hatchet* (1972) explore the concept of perverse or monstrous mothering. Dolores Roche (Delo), the self-proclaimed matriarch of Meehan's prison drama, adopts a motherly tone while sexually abusing Lila Byrne in exchange for heroin: 'Mammy loves Lila. Mammy loves her little titties.'[17] In the play *Hatchet*, Mrs Bailey is depicted as having socialised her son into committing acts of violence: 'The Digger would fight anyone, and so would Hatchet, I never reared a gibber [...] Hadn't he to face the animal gang with a hatchet when he was only fourteen, didn't ye son?'[18] In Christine Dwyer Hickey's short story 'The Absence' (2013), the adult narrator, seeing his mother's hand for the first time in nearly twenty years, vividly remembers 'the sound of it slapping a leg, or a face or folding into a fist to punch the back of a head'.[19] The first section of Dermot Bolger's *The Woman's Daughter* (1987) is the story of a mother who imprisons and regularly beats a child born of an incestuous relationship. Dorothy Nelson's *In Night's City* (1982) foregrounds a woman's complicity in the sexual abuse

[15] Roddy Doyle, *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996), p. 88; further references to this edition are cited parenthetically in the text.
[16] Fannie Gallaher, extract from *Katty the Flash: A Mould of Dublin Mud* (1880), in *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Vol. V*, ed. by Angela Bourke and others (Cork: Cork University Press in association with Field Day, 2002), pp. 939–44 (p. 939).
[17] Paula Meehan, *Cell* (Dublin: New Island, 2000), p. 19.
[18] Heno Magee, *Hatchet* (Dublin: Gallery, [original edn 1972] 1978), p. 33.
[19] Christine Dwyer Hickey, 'Absence', in *The House on Parkgate Street and Other Dublin Stories* (Dublin: New Island, 2013), pp. 13–33 (p. 30).

of her daughter. Mary Morrissy's *Mother of Pearl* (1996) features a mother who finds it hard to accept the 'stick-like being' that she has given birth to as human, while her short story 'Rosa' (1993) tells of a young woman who arranges for her newborn baby to be left to die in an empty department store.[20]

All of the working-class mothers featured in these texts can be contrasted to Plunkett's Mary Fitzpatrick, MacSwiney's Polly Mahony, Smith's Molly Baines and O'Casey's Juno Boyle, but the extent to which they challenge essentialist constructions of maternity varies. The grotesque mother that is the focus of *Katty the Flash* is key to that narrative's highly moralistic treatment of 'illegitimacy' and single motherhood. Katty Sr's 'unnatural' maternal behaviour is the ultimate indicator of her divergence from bourgeois societal norms. In *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*, written more than a hundred years later, Paula's limitations as a mother are linked to the socio-economic critique provided by the novel. Like the female characters that Pierse discusses in *Writing Ireland's Working Class*, Paula has experienced 'multiple social and economic impediments: as part of a disadvantaged economic class, as [a woman] in a male-dominated society, but also as [a woman] living in an especially androcentric working-class culture'.[21] The novel points to the double standard in sexual matters that Paula has encountered throughout her life: 'You were a slut if you let fellas put their tongues in your mouth and you were a tight bitch if you didn't – but you could also be a slut if you didn't. One or the other, sometimes both. There was no escape' (47). Paula's entrapment takes multiple forms, but is ultimately shown to stem from the simple fact that she is a woman from a working-class background. Her maternal instincts are revealed to be intact – Paula's eventual expulsion of her violent husband from the family home is triggered not by his many brutal attacks on her, but by the threat that he begins to pose to their eldest daughter – but sometimes these instincts are eclipsed by a dependency on alcohol that is at least partially attributable to the difficult circumstances of Paula's life. While Katty Sr in *Katty the Flash* is held personally accountable for her failings as a mother and Paula's failings are contextualised, both of these texts assume the reader's awareness of the maternal ideal from which these mothers deviate.

Mary Morrissy's writings on working-class Irish women, in contrast to these two very different texts, are notable for their sustained interrogation

[20] Mary Morrissy, *Mother of Pearl* (London: Vintage, [original edn 1996] 1997), p. 115; further references to this edition are cited parenthetically in the text.
[21] Pierse, *Writing Ireland's Working Class*, p. 113.

of patriarchal ideologies of maternity. These writings include works that challenge the idea of motherhood as 'natural' and foreground issues relating to the 'dark' side of maternity, including 'illegitimacy', abortion and infanticide. In a number of her publications, Morrissy broaches women's sometimes troubled responses to pregnancy, parturition and new motherhood. In the aforementioned short story 'Rosa', the narrator's pregnant sister describes fellow expectant mothers as '[d]romedaries, one-humped camels, beasts of burden'.[22] Following 'hours of hard labour' that culminate with the doctor 'tear[ing] away the afterbirth with his fingers', Bella, in *The Rising of Bella Casey* (2013), would be more than happy to follow the doctor's advice that she have no more children.[23] When Rita, in *Mother of Pearl*, watches other new mothers breast-feeding their babies, she cannot understand the women's calm response to an act that she perceives as akin to a physical assault (120). Her own daughter, Pearl/Mary, ends her pregnancy by dispelling the 'mollusc of flesh' with a knitting needle (215). The pregnant girl in 'Rosa' gives birth having previously failed to induce a miscarriage and asks her sister to abandon the newborn baby in a department store's Christmas crib, 'the ultimate picture of maternity' (28). The crib, which had replaced a plastic Santa Claus following the Pope's declaration of a holy year, points to the Catholic Church's role in reinforcing an essentialised concept of motherhood. Its location, in Dublin's commercial centre, suggests an alignment between that church and the Irish middle classes. This story of infanticide set against the backdrop of a bourgeois society that wishes to be seen to obey religious dictates contains covert references to a medical procedure that the pregnant working-class girl clearly wants but has limited access to: 'her arms encompassing the bump in a gesture of aborted protection' (31).

When Mary in O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* laments that her baby will have no father, Juno reassures her that she will be a second mother to the child (145–6). Like Juno's imminent grandchild in *Juno and the Paycock*, Pearl/Mary in *Mother of Pearl* has two mothers. While in the O'Casey play the double mothering referred to towards the end of its closing act functions as a final endorsement of the exemplary mothering role provided by Juno, Morrissy includes two mothers in her Belfast-based novel so that she can ask difficult questions about the nature and reality

[22] Mary Morrissy, 'Rosa', in *A Lazy Eye* (London: Vintage, [original edn 1993] 1996), pp. 25–38 (p. 32); further references to this edition are cited parenthetically in the text.
[23] Mary Morrissy, *The Rising of Bella Casey* (Dublin: Brandon, 2013), p. 219; further references to this edition are cited parenthetically in the text.

of motherhood. One of these working-class mothers, Rita Golden/Spain, is the biological mother who views her baby as 'something not quite human', and the other, Irene Rivers/Godwin, is the nurturing mother who feels 'as one' with the child that she images into being and then kidnaps (117, 70). As Anne Fogarty states, in the complex story that is produced by Morrissy's tripartite narrative, 'it is only the non-biological mother who is capable of experiencing a positive connection with the daughter that she has forcefully to create for herself.'[24] Indeed, Rita views the kidnapping of her child as divine punishment for her 'unnatural' response to a pregnancy that she experienced as a 'violent struggle' (98). Notwithstanding allusions to the biblical tale of two mothers wrangling over one child (31, 49, 89), this novel is less interested in determining the 'true' mother of Pearl/Mary than in 'open[ing] to investigation the notion that maternal love is a natural and instinctive aspect of the female psychic economy'.[25] Both mothers are relevant to this investigation. Rita's negative response to pregnancy and motherhood challenges a belief in the essential maternal nature of all women, while Irene's intense longing for a child is shown to be exacerbated by the expectations of female neighbours who will not accept her into their midst until she produces a baby: 'The first thing they asked if they met her at the dairy or in the church porch was "Any news?" By that, they meant one thing, the one thing Irene knew she could not deliver' (40). When anticipating losing Pearl/Mary, Irene remembers the 'pride' that she 'had felt pushing the baby carriage out into the sun by the front door', her maternal prowess visible to all (86). Her only request, when the police come to arrest her is that she herself be taken away 'under cover of darkness', her de-mothering unwitnessed by the same women to whom she had previously displayed Pearl/Mary (89). Moreover, as Fogarty notes, Irene's all-consuming desire for a child is revealed in the novel to at least partially stem from the invasive physical procedures and loss of identity that she experienced while being treated for tuberculosis as a young woman:[26] 'No man had ever entered her; how could a baby come out? It would have to be torn from her, yanked out like her shattered ribs had been' (54). *Mother of Pearl* closes with Irene, newly released from prison for the kidnap of Pearl/Mary, returning to the institution in which she had been

[24] Anne Fogarty, 'Uncanny Families: Neo-Gothic Motifs and the Theme of Social Change in Contemporary Irish Women's Fiction', *Irish University Review*, 30.1 (2000), pp. 59–81 (p. 68).
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.

placed as a young woman with tuberculosis and resuming her former kitchen work in what is now a home for the elderly.

Some of the working-class women that we encounter in Irish literature are engaged full-time in unpaid household work. In the texts in which much depends, aesthetically and ideologically, on the figure of the 'good' mother, significant emphasis is placed on the dedication with which women perform household and life-maintaining tasks, notwithstanding the many obstacles that they face. Thus, Mary Fitzpatrick in *Strumpet City* strives to keep the family's living space clean and homely, even if she can no longer afford to furnish it properly – 'The room was still bare of any real furniture. But there was a fire in the grate' – and ensures that nothing goes to waste: 'She took the jug from the table and returned what remained of the milk to the child's bottle' (564, 238). Other working-class female characters, such as Irene in the closing pages of *Mother of Pearl*, are engaged in paid work. Women have been assigned a distinctly marginal role in such celebrated accounts of Irish labour history as Peter Berresford Ellis's *A History of the Irish Working Class* (1972). However, in the context of an only partially industrialised Irish society, in which men were often employed in irregular work, working-class women's waged labour was of considerable financial importance to the family unit. Though generally poorly paid, such work could provide a much-needed steady income. Some of the working-class women featured in Irish literature work in production. Catherine Byron's poem 'Sheers' (1993) points to the significance of women to the linen industry, so crucial to the economic strength of the north of Ireland, particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The speaker of the poem is one of forty young women working on looms in a factory setting. Central female figures in Daniel Corkery's 'The Lady of the Glassy Palace' from *A Munster Twilight* (1916), Frank McGuinness's *The Factory Girls* (1982), Dermot Bolger's *The Woman's Daughter*, Frances Molloy's *No Mate for Magpie* (1985) and Mary Costello's 'The China Factory' (2012) work in factories based respectively in Cork, Donegal, Dublin, Derry and Galway. Miss Neligan in Corkery's short story, the women featured in McGuinness's play and Ann Elizabeth McClone in Molloy's novel work in the clothing industry. Sandra O'Connor, in *The Woman's Daughter*, removes 'indented cans from the incessant silver stream' that flows down a seemingly endless conveyor belt.[27] Costello's short story tells of the narrator's brief stint as a sponger in a factory that makes pseudo-Celtic china for American tourists.

[27] Dermot Bolger, *The Woman's Daughter* (London: Penguin, [original edn 1987] 1992), p. 4.

In contrast to Britain, service rather than production occupations provided the greater proportion of Irish working-class jobs in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[28] Mary E. Daly states that 'by 1911 one working woman in three (as defined by the census) was in service.'[29] Moreover, as Maria Luddy points out, in the south of Ireland domestic service remained 'the largest single source of female employment until the 1950s'.[30] At the time of the 1911 census, 93 per cent of Irish indoor servants were women.[31] Given the centrality of women to the service industry, it is hardly surprising that the vast number of employed working-class women featured in Irish texts are engaged in service jobs and, in particular, in paid household labour. The life-writings, Frank O'Connor's *An Only Child* and Mary Healy's *For the Poor and the Gentry* (1989), provide examples of such women. While *For the Poor and the Gentry* recounts the author's experiences – first as a housemaid and then as a parlour-maid – in two Big Houses in Ireland, O'Connor's autobiography contains a humorous account of his mother's time as a domestic servant in relatively modest Irish households.[32] Included amongst the fictional writings set in Ireland that make reference to women engaged in paid household labour are George Egerton's (Mary Chavelita Dunne) 'A Cross Line' (1893), James Stephens's *The Charwoman's Daughter*, James Joyce's *Dubliners* stories 'Two Gallants', 'Clay' and 'The Dead' (1914), Paul Smith's *The Countrywoman*, James Plunkett's *Strumpet City*, Roddy Doyle's *The Woman who Walked into Doors* and Mary Morrissy's *The Rising of Bella Casey*. Mary Hoult's 'Bridget Kiernan' (1928) features an Irish domestic servant working in London, while one of the most daring depictions of an English woman engaged in paid domestic work, *Esther Waters* (1894), was provided by an Irish writer, George Moore.

Many of these writings point to the vulnerability of women employed in domestic service, particularly when either young or old. Both Plunkett's *Strumpet City* and stories contained in Joyce's *Dubliners* make reference to

[28] Mona Hearn, *Below Stairs: Domestic Service Remembered in Dublin and Beyond, 1880–1922* (Dublin: Lilliput, 1993), p. 1.

[29] Mary E. Daly, 'The Economy from 1850', in *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Vol. V*, pp. 530–1 (p. 530).

[30] Maria Luddy, 'Working Women, Trade Unionism and Politics in Ireland, 1830–1945', in *Politics and the Irish Working Class, 1830–1945*, ed. by Fintan Lane and Donal Ó Drisceoil (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 44–61 (p. 46).

[31] Hearn, *Below Stairs*, p. 11.

[32] Contrary to popular perception, most women engaged in paid household labour in Ireland in the first half of the twentieth century were working in relatively modest households that employed one or two servants.

the dangers encountered by women engaged in paid household labour at the beginning and end of their working lives. *Strumpet City* opens with two women, Mary and Miss Gilchrist, both of whom work in the Bradshaw household. Mary, as a servant in training, is 'practically the property of the Bradshaws, dependent on their kindness for every occasional release from duty' (62).[33] As a member of a 'class without privilege', she must lie to her employers 'to filch a little freedom from time to time' (62). Her lies, revealed to the reader to be the inevitable outcome of her working conditions, are used by Mr Bradshaw to reinforce the distinction that he seeks to make between his wife and the working-class women, 'breed[ing] like rabbits' (64), who inhabit the 'five infirm shells of tottering brick' which help sustain his wealthy lifestyle (17). However, there is no great reward for being the kind of 'strong, willing and reliable' servant that Mr Bradshaw seeks to employ (64). Miss Gilchrist, who has worked for the Bradshaws for thirty years, naïvely believes that the loyalty she has shown to the family will save her from penury in her old age. Mr Bradshaw acknowledges that 'she is quite devoted' (68), but ultimately views her in economic terms – as the provider of a service for which he pays. Hence, he abandons her to die in a workhouse when she is no longer capable of performing her duties.[34] In response to Father O'Connor's timid observation that Miss Gilchrist 'has been a very long time in service with you', Mr Bradshaw acidly states 'she's been paid for her trouble, every penny' (67). The damning account provided in *Strumpet City* of Mr Bradshaw's heartless treatment of the elderly Miss Gilchrist is a key component of the novel's critique of an economic system that places monetary gain above all else. Like the families that occupy one room each in Mr Bradshaw's tenement buildings, she is the victim of a mind-set that views the prioritisation of people over profit as impractical sentimentality.

Maria, the central character in Joyce's short story 'Clay', is an elderly scullery maid employed in a Protestant charitable institution for 'fallen' women. Similar to Miss Gilchrist, Maria had considered herself part of the family for whom she had previously worked. However, when her services were no longer required, this family procured a job for her in a

[33] Significantly, a bill to regulate the conditions of domestic servants, including their hours of work, was presented to parliament in 1911, but never became law. Hearn, *Below Stairs*, pp. 1–2.

[34] Peter Berresford Ellis points out that in 1911, two years before the Lockout, 41.9 per cent of all Dublin deaths occurred in workhouses. Peter Berresford Ellis, *A History of the Irish Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1972), p. 184. Moreover, 'census returns from 1881 to 1911 show that a quarter to a fifth of the people in workhouses, the largest occupational grouping listed, were servants.' Hearn, *Below Stairs*, p. 91.

Magdalene laundry. Though 'Clay' points to the economic vulnerability of elderly working-class women, its focus is quite different to *Strumpet City*'s. While both Miss Gilchrist and Maria are shown to be naïve in their understanding of their circumstances, in Plunkett's novel Miss Gilchrist's lack of awareness functions primarily to increase the reader's ire at the injustice being perpetrated against her; not only has this elderly woman been condemned to die in a workhouse, but she herself had no expectation of this eventuality. By contrast, in 'Clay' the story's interest lies largely in exploring the gap between Maria's unsophisticated view of the world, as revealed through Joyce's use of free-indirect style, and the reality of her situation. Indeed, the weight placed in the story on the relationship between perception and reality is signalled in the story's opening paragraph: '[The] barmbracks seemed uncut; but if you went closer you would see that they had been cut into long thick even slices.'[35]

Both *Dubliners* stories, 'The Dead' and 'Two Gallants', draw attention to the sexual exploitation of young female domestic servants. In 'The Dead', the housemaid Lily's refusal to respond to Gabriel's patronising overtures in the expected coy yet flirtatious manner, combined with her bitter assertion that '[t]he men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you,' suggests that she may have reason to empathise with the lyrics of 'The Lass of Aughrim', the song of seduction and betrayal that Bartell D'Arcy sings at the closing of the Misses Morkan's annual dance (178). In 'Two Gallants', the 'slavey' (44),[36] who – unlike Lily – is given neither a voice nor a name, has embarked on a sexual relationship with the deeply unpleasant Corley. The treatment meted out to this young woman is used in the story to demonstrate the lengths to which Corley and his companion, Lenehan, are prepared to go in their exploitation of others. In keeping with the theme of *Dubliners* as a whole, these men are shown to be trapped in a paralysed society, their lack of meaningful opportunity signalled by Lenehan's aimless wanderings through the streets of Dublin. Their growth restricted, they have become parasites who betray and take advantage of those around them. That a woman in the position of the 'slavey' would also be trapped in this society, facing additional strictures relating to her socio-economic standing and gender, is not acknowledged in the story. Her underdevelopment as a character can be further linked to

[35] James Joyce, *Dubliners* (London: Penguin, [original edn 1914] 1992), p. 95; further references to this edition are cited parenthetically in the text.

[36] The 'slavey' featured in 'Two Gallants' is most likely a maid-of-all-work, perceived as one of the lowest classes of domestic servants.

her oft-cited symbolic role in the story as the personification of an Ireland that is 'betrayed, not only by Corley, an unscrupulous conqueror who preys on her means and her body, but also by Lenehan, his complaisant companion, too spineless to act in her behalf'.[37]

A common characteristic of fictional accounts of the Irish working class is that the women they feature are often presented as having little or no awareness of the structural basis of class and gender inequalities. There are some exceptions to this. Marie, in Dunne's *Does your Mother?*, assigns blame for the 'stinking hole' that she and her children inhabit to an official mind-set that views slums 'not fit for rats' as appropriate living quarters for working-class people.[38] Moreover, she demonstrates an awareness of both the social reproduction of poverty and the role of the state in reinforcing class boundaries when she accuses her policeman lover of going out 'hunting kids because they were stupid enough to be born in Hell's Kitchen' (33). More recently, Rita Ann Higgins has published poems that feature female speakers with a strong grasp of the part state institutions play in consolidating the power dynamics that underpin the prevailing socio-economic and gender status quo.[39] However, such female characters are in the minority and can be contrasted to the women found in Stephens's *The Charwoman's Daughter*, O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* and Plunkett's *Strumpet City*. In *The Charwoman's Daughter*, Mrs Cafferty, pondering on why her husband has no regular work and her children are hungry, concludes that 'there was something wrong somewhere, but whether the blame was to be allocated to the weather, the employer, the Government, or the Deity, she did not know.'[40] In *Juno and the Paycock*, Mary's trade-union principles are exposed as 'no more than a trite slogan',[41] while her mother, Juno, suggests that the solution to the country's 'state o' chassis' is for 'the people [to] folloy up their religion betther' (104). The story of the prostitute Lily Maxwell in *Strumpet City* reinforces Plunkett's critique of the prevailing socio-economic system,[42] but when Pat Bannister accuses

[37] Florence L. Walzl, 'Symbolism in Joyce's "Two Gallants"', *James Joyce Quarterly*, 2.2 (1965), pp. 73–81 (p. 75).

[38] Lee Dunne, *Does your Mother?* (London: Arrow Books, 1970), p. 7.

[39] See, for example, Higgins's poems, 'God-of-the-Hatch Man', 'Woman's Inhumanity to Woman' and 'Some People', in Rita Ann Higgins, *Throw in the Vowels* (Highgreen: Bloodaxe, 2005), pp. 29, 53–4, 58.

[40] James Stephens, *The Charwoman's Daughter* (Dublin: Scepter, [original edn 1912] 1966), p. 97.

[41] Lionel Pilkington, *Theatre and State in Twentieth-Century Ireland: Cultivating the People* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 94.

[42] Lily sells her body to avoid the economic exploitation associated with the other forms of labour available to her: 'Making biscuits or something for five bob a week? I had enough of that.' Plunkett, *Strumpet City*, p. 127. As Pierse points out, the figure of the prostitute often functions

Lily of never asking herself 'why the poor are poor', she tells him that she doesn't question the way God made the world (129). When informed that James Connolly is campaigning for votes for women, she dismissively responds: 'What would I do with a vote?' (130).

In some works, including *Juno and the Paycock* and *Strumpet City*, this lack of awareness is simply taken for granted, with women associated with a humanity that is largely absent from their more politically engaged male counterparts. As Seamus Deane states in relation to *Juno*, 'the ignorance of the women would appear to be a safeguard against [the] unfeelingness' associated with the play's male characters.[43] Thus these writings conform to a tendency that Anna McMullan and Caroline Williams have noted in male-authored texts 'to see women or the feminine as embodying values and areas of experience lacking in a male-defined society or in traditional concepts of masculinity'.[44] Other works provide a context for failure on the part of female characters to comprehend the structural underpinnings of their impoverished circumstances. In *The Charwoman's Daughter*, this incomprehension is linked to the women's desire for wealth and its consumerist rewards. Notwithstanding the fact that Mrs Makebelieve and her daughter are given the improbable fairy-tale ending that they had longed for, this novel offers a strong critique of prevailing socio-economic forces. Capitalism is revealed in *The Charwoman's Daughter* to be a highly seductive economic system that diverts the women's attention from the power structures at work on their lives by encouraging them to divide their time between either wanting the things that they do not have or enjoying the voyeuristic pleasures that a consumerist society has to offer. As Liam Lanigan notes, 'Mary frequently alleviates her hunger pangs by indulging in the phantasmagoric escapism provided by the Grafton Street shop windows.'[45] By contrast, Smith's *The Countrywoman* and McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* depict the Catholic Church as playing a key role in maintaining

in working-class writing to 'highlight the narrowness of opportunity that working-class women are afforded'. Pierse, *Writing Ireland's Working Class*, p. 159. In such writings, prostitution is generally accompanied by a 'moral descent'. By placing emphasis on the erosion of innocence, the texts' indictment of the socio-economic status quo simultaneously re-inscribes the place of woman as upholder of 'virtue'. In *Strumpet City*, however, while prostitution is portrayed as a source of 'anguish' and 'suffering' for Lily, it has no negative impact on her character. Plunkett, *Strumpet City*, pp. 159, 251.

[43] Seamus Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, [original edn 1986] 1994), p. 163.

[44] Anna McMullan and Caroline Williams, 'Contemporary Women Playwrights', in *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Vol. V*, pp. 1234–46 (p. 1237).

[45] Liam Lanigan, 'Revival and the City in James Stephen's Dublin Fiction', *UCDscholarcast*, 12 (2015), pp. 2–25 (p. 10).

the socio-economic status quo by stringently policing class boundaries and encouraging working-class women to accept their fate. Some texts draw attention to the often solitary nature of working-class women's paid labour, quite rightly suggesting that such work conditions provide little opportunity for solidarity on the grounds of either class or gender. Paula Spencer, in *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*, enjoys the camaraderie she shares with the other women who travel into the centre of Dublin in the evening to clean office buildings, but once the women reach their various destinations, they have little contact. Moreover, Paula has no idea who owns the company whose offices she cleans, what the company does or who else works there: 'There's me, a vital cog in the machine, and none of the other cogs have ever seen me' (107). In other texts, such as Stephens's *Hunger*, poverty itself is shown to render 'its victims voiceless, politically impotent'.[46] Though offering a less explicit critique of the existing socio-economic order than *The Charwoman's Daughter*, this story uses the observations of its central female character to draw the reader's attention to the unequal distribution of wealth that results from that order: 'She followed people with her eyes, sometimes a little way with her feet, saying to herself: "The pockets of that man are full of money; he would rattle if he fell." '[47] However, the starving woman at the centre of this story can voice neither these observations nor any other when seeking assistance at a relief kitchen: '[S]he did not argue about the matter, for now that she accepted food, she accepted anything that came with it, whether it was opinions or advice; she was an acceptor, and she did not claim to possess even an opinion' (24).

While writings such as Maura Lafferty's *Liffey Lane* (1947) point to a communal kinship facilitated by working-class urban life that goes beyond the bourgeois limits of home and family, a number of texts quite rightly indicate that working-class Irish women are not a homogenous grouping. Subtle social gradations amongst working-class women, as signified by the distinction between 'hattie' and 'shawlie', for example, are referenced in O'Connor's *An Only Child*, Daniel Corkery's 'The Return' in *A Munster Twilight* and Mary Becket's 'A Belfast Woman' (1980). Recalling the 'long black shawl' that his mother always wore when economic necessity impelled her to take a trip to the pawnshop, O'Connor notes that

[46] Ruth Sherry, 'The Irish Working Class in Fiction', in *The British Working-Class Novel in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Jeremy Hawthorn (London: Edward Arnold, 1984), pp. 111–24 (p. 119).

[47] James Stephens, *Hunger: A Dublin Story* (Dublin: The Candle Press, 1918), p. 23; further references to this edition are cited parenthetically in the text.

her exchange of a hat for a shawl marked 'an immediate descent in the social scale' from poor to 'the poorest of the poor'.[48] Internal status divisions in domestic service are revealed in Healy's *For the Poor and for the Gentry*,[49] while other hierarchies in working-class women's paid labour are indicated in the distinction that Queenie Mullins forms in Smith's *The Countrywoman* between her work as a charwoman and a factory or restaurant job (135).

Differences within the working class are shown in some texts to preclude class and gender solidarity. In a number of female-authored writings, religious/ethno-religious division inhibits working-class women's understanding of the power structures that shape their lives, preventing them from joining forces against class and gender inequalities. Morrissy's *The Rising of Bella Casey* and Christina Reid's *Tea in a China Cup* (1983) both feature impoverished Protestant women whose sense of superiority over their Catholic neighbours facilitates their acceptance of the status quo. Though Bella Casey/Beaver's circumstances are similar to those of the Dublin 'Romanists' she lives amongst, she insists on 'her own singularity', refusing to 'hang Beaver smalls out on their communal [washing] lines' (Morrissy, 283, 275). *Tea in a China Cup* is a Belfast-based play centred on women across three generations of a working-class Protestant family. When the youngest of these women, Beth, points out that her family, like the Catholics her older relatives are so critical of, are poor, her grandmother responds: 'No matter how poor we are, child, we work hard and keep ourselves and our homes clean and respectable, and we always have a bit of fine bone china and a good table linen by us.'[50] The sometimes tenuous nature of the distinctions that the women of this family seek to establish between themselves and their Catholic neighbours is revealed when Beth tells her aunt and grandmother that her mother, in order to pay the rent, had to sell a china cabinet, one of the women's chosen markers of difference, to a Catholic woman. Mary Costello's *Titanic Town* (1992) suggests that sectarian politics in Northern Ireland has functioned to keep both Catholic and Protestant women in their place. In this semi-autobiographical novel, the women who do attempt to enter the political arena are manipulated by male politicians of all political persuasions. That said, some writings, such as Beckett's 'The Belfast Woman' and Molloy's *No Mate for the Magpie*

[48] Frank O'Connor, *An Only Child* (London: Macmillan, 1961), pp. 32–3.
[49] Mary Healy, *For the Poor and the Gentry: Mary Healy Remembers her Life* (Dublin: Geography Publications, 1989), p. 48.
[50] Christina Reid, *Tea in a China Cup*, in *Christina Reid: Plays One* (London: Methuen, [original edn 1983] 1997), pp. 1–65 (p. 25).

(1985), quite rightly suggest that Protestant working-class women living north of the border may not be completely deluded in thinking that historically their position has been better than that of their Catholic equivalents. In Beckett's short story, both Catholic and Protestant women face being burnt out of their houses but, according to the story's Catholic narrator, the Protestant women 'can always get newer better houses when they ask for them'.[51] Commenting on responses to the civil rights movement in the north, the female protagonist of *No Mate for the Magpie* wryly states that a lot of ordinary Catholic people had been 'surprised to learn that they had been citizens all their lives, an' not only citizens, but second-class citizens too at that'.[52] As these two texts reveal, Catholics in Northern Ireland have been discriminated against on every rung of the social and economic ladder: jobs, housing, education and voting rights. In the colonial context of Northern Ireland, Catholic women, as Sarah Edge states, 'were situated as the double Other, both the Other to patriarchal male power and the Other to dominant British national identity'.[53] Protestant working-class women in Northern Ireland, like their Catholic equivalents, were the Other to both patriarchal male power and class privilege, but, as Reid's *Tea in a China Cup* indicates, they were essential to the perpetuation of the dominant national identity and the guarding of its ethnic and cultural boundaries.

In this chapter, I have gathered together an array of Irish urban writings that feature working-class women, and mapped out, with reference to a number of key questions, some connections between their depictions of female characters. That said, this is not an exhaustive study. There are other relevant writings that, due to space restrictions, I have not discussed. Moreover, this chapter's focus on a relatively large number of works is sometimes at the expense of textual exposition, formal analysis and historical contextualisation. However, by demonstrating the often vital role working-class female characters play in well-known texts and by bringing some less familiar urban writings into the critical frame, this chapter lays the foundations for much-needed further scholarly work on the representation of working-class Irish women.

[51] Mary Beckett, 'A Belfast Woman', in *A Belfast Woman and Other Stories* (Dublin: Poolbeg Press, 1980), pp. 84–99 (p. 98).
[52] Frances Molloy, *No Mate for the Magpie* (London: Virago, 1985), p. 127.
[53] Sarah Edge, 'Representing Gender and National Identity', in *Rethinking Northern Ireland: Culture, Ideology, Colonialism*, ed. by D. Miller (London: Longman, 1998), pp. 211–28 (pp. 215–16).