

**Between Here And There: Self, Place And Gender In The Fiction Of William Trevor, Sebastian Barry And Colm Toibin**

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Contemporary Irish Literature continues to be shaped by and to reflect the major reconfigurations that have taken place in Irish culture and society over the last thirty years. Amongst the many early examples of the way history, identity, gender and sexuality were being re-read and re-written are Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) and John McGahern's *Amongst Women* (1990), both of which are set in small towns in remote areas of rural Ireland and engage deeply with issues of politics, gender and gender politics. At the start of the 'live' action in *Lughnasa* Friel employs an image which instantly reminds one of Joyce's 'cracked looking-glass' at the beginning of *Ulysses*. It is voiced not by a sardonic, aspiring male artist, but by a frustrated twenty-six year-old unmarried mother, the youngest Mundy sister, Chrissie: 'When are we going to get a decent mirror to see ourselves in?'

This lecture will examine four texts which, with comparable skill and insight, register the distance between Ireland's past and present: William Trevor's *Reading Turgenev* (1991) and *Felicia's Journey* (1994), Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture* (2008) and Colm Toibin's *Brooklyn* (2009). It is significant that female characters occupy a central position in each of these male-authored narratives, which testify to the varying degree of social, economic, spiritual and psychological constraints under which Irish women and, to a lesser extent, men, laboured at different junctures of the twentieth century. Whereas Roseanne McNulty (*The Secret Scripture*) and Mary Louise Dallon (*Reading Turgenev*) attempt to cope with confinement and to seek verification through acts of writing and reading, Eilis Lacey (*Brooklyn*) and Felicia (*Felicia's Journey*) are compelled by circumstances to relocate themselves in large urban centres abroad. Discussion will not be confined, however, to thematic concerns, characterisation and setting, but extend to differences in narrative technique.

Individually and collectively, these works function as highly polished mirrors through which to view Irish experience, and to achieve fresh perceptual angles.