Prevalent Irish Literature Themes in Edna O’Brien’s *Irish Revel*
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In Edna O’Brien’s *Irish Revel*, we are exposed to several popular themes in modern Irish literature: the dynamic between the upper and the lower class and also between the rural and the city people, the hard life of the poor, struggling Irishman and the longing for escape, and that of respect (or fear) of religion and superstition. There is also a general distrust and condemnation of those that seek to venture out of their given position.

When we first see Mary, she is peddling a rundown bike with a rotted “tyre” down the mountain, toward town. Although we learn she is headed to a party, it isn’t until a little later in the passage that we realize the full effect of the scene: Mary has plaited her hair in order to have long, beautiful waves, and is wearing her family’s best dress of black lace (which she isn’t even allowed to wear to mass), while she is peddling this rickety bike up and down the hills and valleys until she gets to the bottom of the mountain where she will finally arrive at her first party. Imagine the scene propped against the description of her small, humble, hard life of living on a “mountainy” farm, taking care of the animals, all the hard work, even taking care of the children and having two of her baby siblings sleeping in her tiny bed with her every night. She even, out of habit, looks back at the tiny house that is her everyday life, seeing it as so small as she rides away. We get excited for Mary, being able to venture out beyond her every day world. We sense her longing to escape, her need for excitement, to be wanted by someone for more than just help with the chores and raising of the babies, and her need to (at least for a little while) lead a life that is less...well, hard. We begin to want this break for Mary almost as much as she does, because of the fantastic imagery that O’Brien has put in our head of what it is to live this life every day, every week, every season...year after year. This is the life of the poor in Ireland, the daily struggle to survive. This is Mary’s life, and we want Mary to have a measure of relief.
However, in the back of my mind while reading this story, I kept thinking that it can’t be that easy. This can’t be a story about how this poor, hard working girl, gets a much-needed break from her reality. From what I’ve read in this course, that isn’t the way Irish Literature works. There is the set-up...when we are exposed to the characters, made to care for them, and no matter how different they are from us in our own lives, we are even made to feel what they are feeling—to hurt when they hurt, to long for what they long for, and to imagine that they are us.

In *Guests of the Nation*, we are thrust into the middle of a war we are not involved in, yet we are thrown into the lives and hearts of the characters at this given moment in time. We sympathize with the naïve captors, who make friends with and relate to their prisoners. We see the prisoners as human, not as the enemy. We are amazed, but happy, at the seemingly comfortable situation that has developed, despite how normal captor/captive relationships usually work during war time. We think that maybe, just maybe, this situation is different. This will be the story with a happy ending, and that’s the point of it all. The lesson in this story is that the enemy isn’t only just like us, they are us. This story must end differently. Only it doesn’t. In any other story of prisoners being held captive during the war, we know that most likely, those prisoners are going to die in the end. However, when this story ends in the same manner, we are horrified. That wasn’t supposed to happen. We had such hopes for each of the characters.

We also had such hopes for Mary. Mary in her long, wavy hair, with her family’s best dress...Mary peddling the rickety bike down the mountain, toward a much-anticipated party...Mary, who is greeted with disdain and treated as a maid upon her arrival. And are we surprised? Yes, of course we are. We had such hopes! But should we be? No, we shouldn’t. We should have already known that Mary isn’t going to be plucked from her hard mountain life and thrust into town to attend a wonderful party and to be welcomed with open arms. It just doesn’t work that way. But the way O’Brien puts us in
Mary’s shoes, we believe it *should*, because we want this for her. But the nature of lower class versus upper class, of rural folks versus those in the city, means that Mary can’t walk into that world, even with an invitation, and be accepted.

Besides being given the impression that the poor people in Ireland are hard-working, long-suffering people, just struggling to survive, we are also given a certain impression of the city folk and those of the upper class, and it isn’t necessarily a positive one. The people at the party are privileged and have nice things. Mrs. Rodgers is very important and well respected in the community. The guests are also looked favorably upon and have a good reputation. However, they seem disingenuous. The town girls Mary has to “work” with are spiteful and petty, making fun of Mary and her dress, and even her hopes, while making her do all the work, and taking breaks in the bathroom to drink. Mrs. Rodgers herself only invited Mary so that she could have another set of hands to put to work at the affair. One of the guests, Mr. O’Toole, is said to like the “simple minded” girls, and wonders if he can take Mary into one of the bedrooms and “do it” later.

This characterization of the upper class reminds me of the story *News from Ireland* and the Pulvertafts. The family has inherited an estate left to them by a distant relative. They are silly and obnoxious, oblivious to how others really see them. While they build the frivolous road to employ some of the locals, and think that they are looked upon favorably, especially for giving out soup one day a week to the hungry (while people continue to die all around them), the lower class have a completely different opinion of them. This seems to be a common theme, of the rich and upper-class, or the city-folk, thinking they are something special, while those around them see them for who they really are. It’s as if, in Irish literature, it is mainly the poor that are virtuous or have a true grasp on how things should be. The divide between the upper and lower class and the rural folk and the city folk is seen throughout the stories we’ve read.
It isn’t just those that are born into the upper class that are distrusted. In *Plough and the Stars*, Nora is given grief by a neighbor just for wanting to be more than what she is. She is still living in the same tenement as the neighbor, still basically in the same class, but just because she thinks of having more, she isn’t trusted, and is treated as an outsider by the neighbor. In *News from Ireland*, the caretaker seems to think that the nanny wouldn’t want to better her position by marrying the foreman, and that even if she did, he and his sister would end up playing cards with them rather than the Pulvertaft’s having them over for dinner. He loses respect for the nanny when she marries the foreman and acts as though she is in a better position (which she is). It’s as though her new higher position in life somehow makes her untrustworthy, and is something shameful. There is something shameful with the nanny, but that is only in that she has “learned to live with” the atrocities going on around them…the families dying, the poverty and suffering, the starvation. But this really doesn’t have anything to do with class, especially since the caretaker himself refuses to speak up as well.

This distrust at social upward mobility (or at least the want for that mobility) is echoed in the passage from *Irish Revel*, as Mary’s mother doesn’t understand why Mary would want to go to a party in town, and doesn’t trust the idea at all. Although she is allowed to go, it is with warnings not to drink the alcohol and not to lose her head. She is even after being doused in holy water by her mother before leaving! Mary’s family distrusts the townspeople and seem to think nothing good can really come of her attending this party and associating with them on a social level. It’s hard for them to see why she would want to go anyway, when there is so much work to do, and the babies might wake in the middle of the night and cry.

Mary’s mother has resigned herself to the hard life of a “mountainy” person, and seems to think Mary should as well. She doesn’t understand Mary’s want for escape of this hard life, or need to make a better way for herself. This part of the passage makes me wonder what Mary’s mother was like when
she was younger-if she had the same want to escape before finally resigning herself to this life. It seems doubtful that she has, because you would think she would encourage her own daughter’s escape, encourage her relief from the hard life. It’s hard to imagine that she wouldn’t want the same things she had hoped for herself, to come to light for her daughter. It seems only reasonable that it had never occurred to her to think of any other type of life than the one she’s living, under that rationale.

However, maybe her mother did hope for another life—an escape. Maybe it isn’t just Mary’s generation that hopes for it, but every generation, just like the one before it, longs to escape the drudgery they are born into. It’s only because the eventual resignation to the hard life they were destined for comes with such heartbreak, from giving up any hopes or dreams outside of that lot, that she discourages her own daughter from even thinking of it. Maybe she’s trying to make Mary resign herself to the hard life early, so it doesn’t hurt as much from disappointment of lost hope when it finally does happen.

The longing for escape and to be better or have better than the common life you were born into isn’t exclusive of the lower or rural class in Irish literature. In Joyce’s *The Dead*, our main character, Gabriel, is a privileged young man from Dublin, one of the big cities in Ireland. He attends social events, is well educated, and comes from a respected family where his aunts are well-known and liked. However, he is ashamed of his homeland and has the need to escape. His need to get out of Ireland and live abroad to truly be happy eats at him throughout the story, especially when pressed by Miss Ivors to vacation in the Aran Isles with a group of his friends. He stutters about already planning to vacation elsewhere, when the truth is that he just doesn’t want to spend any more time than is necessary back “home” in Ireland.

The need for escape is also present in Moore’s *Home Sickness*. An Irishman living in New York City has taken a turn for the worse with his health, and is instructed by his doctor that a visit back home will do him some good. The man takes the doctor’s advice, and almost immediately upon returning
home, his health improves. He starts to feel better and becomes reconnected with his home country, even finding a girl to court with plans to marry. However, the same need to escape Ireland that drove him to America all those years before returns. He misses his life and the bowery he had worked in. He’s becoming agitated with everything surrounding him, and he ends up jilting the girl and heading back to America. In his twilight years, he thinks of the girl, and of his home, and would like to be buried there.

The character’s back and forth attitude in *Home Sickness* toward his home land with the need to escape fighting with the need to stay connected to the very thing he is trying to escape from is displayed by Mary in *Irish Revel*. While she excitedly peddles the bike down the mountain to the party, with thoughts of an escape (at least a temporary one) from her hard life, it is later that she realizes she would much rather be at home, taking her place in the everyday common activities of her life. What she had fought so hard to escape was the thing she wanted most while at the party.

*Irish Revel*, while representing many popular themes in Irish modern literature, is ultimately a story of a coming of age girl in Ireland, the pain and disappointment she feels, and how she is changed by circumstances she encounters. In comparison to some of Edna O’Brien’s other works, this passage relates to her other stories about girls coming of age in Ireland, of their needs and wants, of their being naïve, and of how they eventually change what they want and desire after a turning point or new experiences. It also heavily represents the mother-daughter dynamic.

In *Sister Imelda*, our narrator is convinced that she and Sister Imelda have an intense bond or relationship that may or may not exist. During the telling of this story, the narrator’s experience with Sister Imelda is also set against a backdrop of her own strained relationship with her mother. She has decided that she will join the convent and become a nun, taking her life in one direction. After growing a little and having experiences outside of the convent, she decides to attend University instead, and while there has a turning point in which she chooses a completely different life for herself. Not only has she
cast aside her intentions of becoming a nun and set aside her feelings for Sister Imelda, but she has become a cheap, painted girl, running around with men and living it up with Baba.

Other stories Edna O’Brien has written are *The Love Object*, *The Country Girls*, *The Outing*, *The Mouth of the Cave*, and *The Rug*, among others, are also about girls (and women) who face pain, disparity, and disappointment, and often include the element of a strained relationship with their mother and a disappointing (at best) father. These elements echo O’Brien’s real-life experiences, and are said to be semi-autobiographical. *Irish Revel* continues those themes and fits in with O’Brien’s earlier works in that manner.