

The Ireland That We Dreamed Of?: 'The Ballroom of Romance'

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William Trevor's short story 'The Ballroom of Romance' (1972) has attained iconic status in Irish culture in the forty years since its publication. The title and ambience of the story, evoking memories of dancehall days, partly explains this public appeal, which was enhanced by the BAFTA award-winning film adaptation of the story by Pat O'Connor (1982). The widespread recognition of and popular identification with the story may also be attributed to the fact that it opens up to scrutiny the experience of mid-twentieth-century Irish society. The title is often deployed discursively as shorthand for the social paralysis and sexual continence of the period, or as a means to denote its gender-divided social context. It is perhaps the best known of Trevor's fictions, and many Irish people who have never actually read the short story are nonetheless familiar with the plot. Despite its hard-hitting social critique, the received version of the story – the one that exists in the popular imagination, but is not derived from the original text – is sometimes yoked to a nostalgia for the 'simplicities' of an earlier time, made consistent with a yearning for a more 'traditional' Ireland. In the story, however, Trevor vividly demonstrates the ways in which the lives of both women and men were atrophied in mid-twentieth-century Ireland. That this is a persistent interest in his fiction is revealed in later short stories such as 'Kathleen's Field' (1990) and 'The Hill Bachelors' (2000), and in his fine novella *Reading Turgenev* (1991). In these works Trevor effectively outlines the ways in which the failed social and economic experiments of the period, particularly the adherence to familism and subsistence

farming, subjugated the youth of the country. This essay focuses principally on 'The Ballroom of Romance' and argues for a more nuanced and differentiated account of his work than has tended to be offered to date.

The narrative's central focus is on the experience of a woman who sacrifices her autonomy and emotional fulfilment for the greater good of her family. The only daughter of a small farmer, Bridie is now thirty-six. Following her mother's death when she was a teenager, she continued working the family farm and kept house for her father, who has a physical disability (he is lame). He is acutely conscious of his dependency on his daughter, recognising that she has missed out on a life of her own because of her responsibilities caring for him. Apart from going to weekly Mass and on monthly shopping trips to the nearby town, Bridie's only social outlet are 'her weekly visits to a wayside dance-hall' (189).¹ There, her early romance with a youth from the town faltered, and now, twenty years later, she pins her future on hopes of marrying Dano Ryan, the drummer in the band. Despite his glamorous-seeming position in the world of the ballroom, Dano is an unskilled labourer who works for the local County Council, and Bridie is acutely aware that he is her social inferior. On this point, Trevor's grasp of the carefully calibrated class hierarchy in rural Ireland is perceptive: Bridie stands to inherit the family farm and her social standing derives from that, whereas Ryan is a landless labourer. Nonetheless, Bridie recognises that Ryan is 'a decent man' who 'would have done' (196, 194); the suggestion that she will 'make do', relinquish her hopes for a love match and settle for domestic contentment, is telling. The critical turning point in Trevor's narrative comes when Bridie realises that Ryan is committed to another woman, and that her dancing days are over.

The ballroom setting, along with the romantic, erotic and imaginative possibilities attendant upon it, is intrinsic to Trevor's story. The resonance of the ballroom in Irish culture is

indicated by its having since become a central location in the work of many other Irish writers, including Enda Walsh, Neil Jordan and Sebastian Barry. What inspired the story,² Trevor tells us, was an actual dancehall, the original 'Ballroom of Romance' in Glenfarne, County Leitrim, opened by a returned migrant, John McGivern, in 1934.³ The geophysical aspect of the Glenfarne 'wayside ballroom' is revealing and resembles other dancehalls throughout provincial Ireland. They tended to be located on the fringes of towns, beyond the easy reach of the authorities and away from the watchful eyes of family members (196). In *The Secret Scripture* (2008), Sebastian Barry depicts the area around Strandhill as just such a liminal space, a sandy marshland near the sea:

At first, a few houses risked on that uncertain ground, then the old hotel, and then huts and more houses, and then, sometime in the vanished twenties, Tom McNulty built the Plaza ballroom. A glorified corrugated iron warehouse with a round roof, a square concrete front to the hall with an oddly modest door and a ticket window.⁴

The meanness of this construction was typical, as is evident in the loose description of such venues in the 1935 Dancehalls Act: 'the word "place" means a building (including part of a building), yard, garden, or other enclosed place, whether roofed or not roofed and whether the enclosure and the roofing (if any) are permanent or temporary'.⁵ The flimsiness of the structure described here gives a sense of transience to the whole enterprise. It refers to the fact that, during the 1960s in particular, businessmen and building contractors threw up ballrooms all over the island, some of them little more than large hangars capable of holding crowds of up to four thousand people at a time.⁶

Constructed cheaply, in borderland areas, and within a nexus of shady dealing, it is not easy to see the romantic side of this picture. Trevor's protagonist Bridie, ultimately comes

around to this way of thinking, and finally sees the tawdry side of the dancehall: ‘The blue walls of the ballroom seemed tatty, marked with hair-oil where men had leaned against them ... The crystal ball gave out a light that was ineffective in the glare; the bowl was broken here and there, which wasn’t noticeable when the other lights weren’t on’ (203). However, smoke and mirrors were the order of the day, in this period when the film industry played a central role in people’s dreams and aspirations, as Barry’s narrator reminisces:

And that stuff in their hair at that time, Brilliantine, was the name I think. There’d be fellas there whose mothers and fathers probably spoke Irish in the back hills of Sligo, and who from going to the pictures now and then had the idea they had obligations to look like stars of the silver screen, unless it was looking like Irish patriots they were trying to be, maybe that was it too. Michael Collins had been a strong man for the grease in his hair. Even de Valera was well slicked down.⁷

The reminder here of these ‘strong men’ of an earlier generation suggests one way to read Trevor’s protagonists; mired in mid-century stagnation they are a world away from these heroes of the War of Independence. Post-Civil War disillusion, economic failure and mass emigration had a profoundly negative impact on their generation.

Trevor’s ballroom, the word itself recalling the elegance of another age, may be understood thus as a place of possibility, an imaginative space outside the dominant culture. This is a common thread in Trevor’s works, central to *Reading Turgenev* also, as he often demonstrates that a youthful spirit of optimism and erotic possibility can imbue the least promising of venues or relationships with an aura of mystery and vitality:

Week by week she’d returned to the ballroom, delighting in its pink façade, and dancing in the arms of Patrick O’Grady ... She knew he loved her, and she believed then that he

would lead her one day from the dim, romantic ballroom, from its blueness and pinkness and its crystal ball of light and its music (196).

The generative possibilities of these encounters are underlined by the pink-and-blue colour coding usually associated with infant clothing; this reference is also suggestive of the infantilisation of adult children who are tied to family farms in the period. The dancehall might be perceived as something that stood out in the day-to-day experience of those who went there regularly, just as it did in the landscape. Nuala O’Faoláin emphasises this: ‘They were the only thing in this miserable country that had anything of youth and sweetness [about them]’.⁸ Likewise, Barry’s narrator describes ‘the mountain [spilling] out its sons and daughters like a queer avalanche. Lovely humanity’.⁹ As with the advent of cinema, the dancehalls, along with contemporary popular music, provided a space in which young Irish people could congregate and sense themselves as part of a new cultural moment, at a remove from the sedate céilís, parish festivals, and whist drives of their parents. Trevor’s careful placing of the Electric cinema and the fish-and-chip shop on the first page of this story gestures to this emerging youth culture.

The musical repertoire in mid-twentieth century dancehalls was mixed, performed by so-called ‘dance orchestras’, such as the Maurice Mulcahy Orchestra for instance.¹⁰ Trevor’s fictional version is similarly comprised of part-time musicians:

The Romantic Jazz Band consisted of Mr Maloney, Mr Swanton, and Dano Ryan on drums. There were three middle-aged men who drove out from the town in Mr Maloney’s car, amateur performers who were employed otherwise by the tinned-meat factory, the Electricity Supply Board and the County Council (191).

It has been well attested elsewhere that the conservative establishment railed against the dancehalls and, in particular, against their deployment of ‘foreign’ music. Clair Wills, for

instance, cites one such contemporary voice complaining that: ‘The fever of dancing ... seems to have seized all classes’. Wills observes that the modern dances themselves, such as the foxtrot, quickstep and slow waltz, ‘offered far more opportunity for physical intimacy than the strictly codified Irish dances’.¹¹ Apart from the dangers of sexual licence, this importation of ‘foreign’ music was perceived as a threat to traditional music and culture in rural Ireland. This came to a head in 1934, when a local clergyman, Fr. Peter Conifrey led a series of ‘Anti-Jazz’ marches in his parish of Mohill, County Leitrim; his protest group garnered widespread church and local government support in the period.¹² In a gesture to this context, Trevor’s fictional impresario, Mr. Dwyer, sets his face against jazz:

In spite of the band’s title, jazz was not ever played in the ballroom: Mr Dwyer did not personally care for that kind of music, nor had he cared for the various dance movements that had come and gone over the years. Jiving, rock and roll, twisting and other such variations had all been resisted by Mr Dwyer, who believed that a ballroom should be, as much as possible, a dignified place (191).

The shabbiness of the hall itself, and the indignities perpetrated against many of his patrons, underlines the ironic mismatch between Mr Dwyer’s vision of his ballroom and the actuality.

In a 1983 interview with Dolores MacKenna, Trevor established that his story is set in 1971,¹³ which seems rather late given that today 1960s Ireland tends to be characterised by a newly-emerging confidence in society and openness to the outside world. The period is usually associated with modernisation, linked to the political and economic initiatives of Seán Lemass and T. K. Whitaker, and remembered as one of growing employment and a cessation of emigration, emerging women’s and other counter-cultural movements. It also witnessed the introduction of free secondary education, and the development of mass media broadcasting, and

the first stirrings of sexual liberation. Yet, Trevor's story, although it hints that such developments are coming down the tracks, evokes an earlier period. His setting, however, is neither accidental nor anachronistic, as he explained in a subsequent interview with MacKenna in 1986:

Time goes slowly in rural Ireland and the past lingers in the West of Ireland. A way of life was killed by the 1960s but some of the old ways remained in Ireland. The story was about the tail-end of something. The real end came at the beginning of the 1970s so I set the story in 1971. The TV production quite rightly dated it in the 1950s – it goes back beyond to the 40s and 30s. But in Ireland things linger on from earlier times – for example people continued to use bicycles in the West of Ireland long after the car was in common use.¹⁴

This insight demonstrates Trevor's intimate acquaintance with the social context he configures, the uneven pace of social change, and the existence of alternate social worlds continuing side-by-side in the same place, sometimes barely cognisant of each other. Not that this is this specific to Irish culture, hence the international resonance of Trevor's story. As Nuala O'Faoláin observes, 'everywhere has its Irelands, and every place has had a 1950s one time or another'.¹⁵

The 'tail-end of something' referred to by Trevor in the interview above goes right to the heart of twentieth-century Irish social hegemonies. This was a culture that instated sexual continence and familism, described by Joseph Valente as 'the indispensable building block of national formation and reproduction', as a means to a sustainable future.¹⁶ The investment in sexual restraint, interacting with essentialist ideas about women's erotic passivity, produced a repressive system of sexual regulation for Irish women and men throughout the twentieth century. Geraldine Moane characterises it as 'an exploitation of reproductive capacities along

with control and suppression of sexual capacities'.¹⁷ Of course, the churches were complicit in this form of social control, and Trevor gestures to this by opening his story with a reference to interacting church and state institutions, the latter represented by the patriarchal family. Trevor's economy of expression is immediately apparent in this exposition. Imbricating his fictional narrative with an incisive understanding of this social world, the tightly-scripted opening paragraph introduces a small family farm in a rural community, the regular practice of Mass attendance and visits by the local Catholic priest to the home, as well as the physical disability of the head of the household and his reliance on the women in the family to support him. It becomes evident early on that Bridie, his daughter, has no siblings, which is indicative of the restrictions in family size inherent to familism. Throughout the narrative her parents are referred to simply as 'her father' and 'her mother', rather than by their names, which signifies their importance as types rather than individual characters; they represent a generation of Irish parents, small farmers, who married in the 1930s when the Free State was still in its infancy. The central protagonist is only ever referred to by her first name, and in its diminutive form at that. The name 'Bridie' reminds the reader of the central protagonist's ambition to *be* a bride, a central point of the story; the name is also linked to 'Biddy', the commonly-used name for domestic servants in the USA in the same period, as Maureen Murphy notes in her work on Irish women's emigration.¹⁸

Her mother's death is mentioned at the end of the first paragraph; this loss means that care responsibilities for her father fall on Bridie's shoulders. Her father is aware of being a burden on his daughter: 'He would sigh heavily, hobbling back from the fields, where he managed as best he could. "If your mother hadn't died", he'd say, not finishing the sentence' (190). Bridie's life sentence is also to be hobbled, required at a young age to assume her

mother's responsibilities in the house and to assist her father with the farm labour: 'If her mother hadn't died her mother could have looked after him and the scant acres he owned, her mother could somehow have lifted the milk churn on to the collection platform and attended to the few hens and the cows' (190). The use of the word 'somehow' here suggests a woman struggling to match a man's strength in order to be able to fulfil his role on the farm. Gender binaries are troubled here, as they were in real life, in that these farm women are allowed to cross essentialist boundaries which confined bourgeois women to the domestic sphere at mid-century. Later in the story, Trevor's physical description of Bridie demonstrates the impact of farm labour on her body, suggestively undermining her femininity:

She was tall and strong: the skin of her fingers and her palms were stained, and harsh to touch. The labour they'd experienced had found its way into them, as though juices had come out of vegetation and pigment out of soil ... Wind had toughened the flesh of her face, sun had browned it; her neck and nose were lean, her lips touched with early wrinkles (190).

It is only on Saturday nights, in the imaginative space of the ballroom, that she inhabits her feminine identity: 'she forgot the scotch grass and the soil. In different dresses she cycled to the dance hall, encouraged to make the journey by her father' (190). While it is possible to read a vested interest in this encouragement: a land-owner's hope for a son-in-law to help keep up the farm, or at best even an heir; it seems to me that Trevor depicts this father figure benignly, as a man who cares for his daughter and wants her to glean some enjoyment from her reduced circumstances.

The loss of a central figure here, Bridie's mother, upsets the heterosocial order in the text; her absence prevents Bridie from attending to her appearance, and from taking a job in the town

where she might have more readily held the attention of her beau, Patrick Grady, who had been ‘scooped up’ by a girl from the town ‘who’d never danced in the wayside ballroom’ (196). The effect of this is to stop her from attaining the social status sanctioned by her community: that of wife and mother. The interaction of patriarchal, Christian, and familist values in mid-twentieth-century Ireland produced a society characterised by the regulation of sexuality and reproduction, and the concomitant institutionalisation of motherhood. At the turn of the twentieth century, cultural nationalists had deployed an iconic mother figure as a means to inspire young men to take up arms for the national cause and to produce, as Katie Conrad argues, a ‘revolutionary family cell’. Conrad goes on to describe how nationalist rhetoric inscribed within it ‘a passive and pure female figure, the ideal woman of the house and keeper of the social order’.¹⁹ This ‘ideal woman of the house’ was inscribed within a discourse of gendered norms and expectations, through which distinctive modes of patriotic action could be validated or naturalised. However, by mid-century, this so-called ‘Mother Ireland’ figure had become a central icon in Irish culture, inscribing gendered social roles in the family, organised along patriarchal lines.

Trevor is alive to this context, and the narrator’s description of the experience of Bridie’s peers, ‘girls she’d been at school with, girls who had married shop-assistants or shopkeepers, or had become assistants themselves’, is indicative of this. They envy Bridie her freedom: ‘You’re lucky to be peaceful in the hills,’ they said to Bridie, ‘instead of stuck in a hole like this’ (189). The ‘hole’ refers to the town, but it could also be said to refer to the domestic trap: ‘They had a tired look, most of them, from pregnancies and their efforts to organize and control their large families’ (189). Gerardine Meaney, in her landmark essay, ‘Sex and Nation: Women in Irish Culture and Politics’, states: ‘Women in these conditions become guarantors of their men’s

status, bearers of national honour and the scapegoats of national identity. They are not merely transformed into symbols of the nation, they become the territory over which power is exercised'.²⁰ As Meaney and others have observed, the concatenation of these ideas about gender, sexuality, and family were made consistent with ideas about Irish national identity in the early twentieth century, and subsequently became central to 'the very substance of what it meant to be Irish'.²¹

Juxtaposing this story with such discourses, Bridie might be posited as the archetypal Victorian and de Valeran Angel in the House, who by her labours in support of the family cell sustains it. And yet because she is yoked to these labours on the family farm, she is prevented from fulfilling the higher role set out for women in her culture. As Article 41.2.2 of the 1937 Irish Constitution suggests, the State will 'endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home'. On close scrutiny, we see the extent to which Bridie has neglected her domestic duties in her efforts to work the farm. Much of her fantasy marriage to Dano Ryan centres on his participation in the family economy, his labour on the farm would have given her time to

attend to things in the farmhouse, things she'd never had time for before because of the cows and the hens and the fields. There were the bedroom curtains that needed repairing where the net had ripped, and wallpaper that had become loose and needed to be stuck up with flour paste. The scullery required white-washing (198).

The suggestion here is that marriage would resolve the perceived gender imbalance in the household, enabling Bridie to relinquish the masculine role she has been forced into and returning her to her proper domestic role. Her father does not sexually exploit Bridie, as is the fate of the central character in Trevor's hard-hitting later story, 'Kathleen's Field'. Nonetheless,

it is clear that, as Kristin Morrison points out, ‘sexual deprivation [is] a price extracted by families’ in Trevor’s work, as it was in mid-twentieth century Irish society more generally.²²

As Conrad’s work suggests, the emergence of psychological discourses in the culture more generally gave an added edge to familist practice, the gatekeepers of which ‘pathologized as disorderly those who did not fit their prescribed roles as reproducers and caretakers of the family’.²³ There was to be no place in this culture for intimacy, sexual desire, or reproduction outside the regulated arenas of marriage and family. Trevor’s Mr Dwyer expounds this in his categorisation of ‘normal’ and aberrant sexual behaviour. Concerned about the advantage taken by of some of the men on the dancefloor, particularly Eyes Horgan who has a reputation for groping his dancing partners, Mr Dwyer determines to confront him about this. Giving further thought to the matter, he elaborates on contemporary sexual mores thus:

Some of the younger lads didn’t know any better and would dance very closely to their partners, who generally were too embarrassed to do anything about it, being young themselves. But that, in Mr Dwyer’s opinion, was a different kettle of fish altogether because they were decent young lads who’d in no time at all be doing a steady line with a girl and would end up as he had himself with Mrs Dwyer, in the same house with her, sleeping in a bed with her, firmly married. It was the middle-aged bachelors who required the watching (197).

The fixed nature of heteronormative attraction and behaviour is clearly outlined here, along with the understanding that desire should be quickly domesticated between opposite-sex partners who are ‘firmly married’ and sleeping (though not necessarily having sex) in a bed together. Any other kind of sexual attraction or behaviour is considered out of bounds in this culture, ‘pathologized as disorderly’ as Conrad puts it. Ageism is part of the discourse too, middle-aged

bachelors are depicted as having no self-control, and older women in the ballroom are shown to be pathetic: ‘Madge Dowding was already a figure of fun in the ballroom, the way she ran after the bachelors’ (196). This was a period in which women’s domestic and reproductive capacities were central to the imagined community of the state, as de Valera’s reference to ‘cosy homesteads’ and ‘sturdy children’ in his well-known 1943 St Patrick’s Day broadcast makes clear. Yet, as Trevor suggests, in a context of high unemployment and mass emigration, there is little opportunity for women like Bridie to access the only legitimate means to attain these goals: marriage. ‘The Ballroom of Romance’ underlines the effects of mid-century economic failure on people’s affective lives, desires and intimate relationships. As such, this story clearly refutes Denis Donoghue’s argument that ‘Trevor has never objected to de Valera’s dream of Ireland’.²⁴

The emigrant boat finished Bridie’s chance of happiness, of escape. To migrate would have meant leaving her father to fend for himself; to do so would have cast her as the selfish daughter, the ungrateful child. As Bowser Egan later puts it: ‘you couldn’t let them rot. You had to honour your father and your mother’ (202). Too well-schooled by familist hegemonies in mid-century Ireland, Bridie never considers emigration as an option for herself, referring only to the ‘weight of circumstances’ which intervened to change the direction of her life. In the story, Bridie imagines what her future with Patrick Grady might have been: ‘living in Wolverhampton – she might have been the mother of four of his children now – going to the pictures at night’ (201). Instead, she has been left behind; as Trevor says in interview, his central protagonist was someone ‘beaten by the land and by the neighbourhood. There is no real way that she could rescue herself’.²⁵

In a number of interviews Trevor cites James Joyce as one of his key influences and in ‘The Ballroom of Romance’ he seems to re-play the central concerns of one of Joyce’s best-

known stories, 'Eveline'. Shifting the setting from an urban to a rural context, and changing the social hinterland to reflect the sixty-year gap between the publication of the two stories, Trevor nonetheless retains key traces of the earlier narrative. While Eveline, initially, seems to have accepted her lover, Frank's, promise of a new life together in Argentina and to have made up her mind to emigrate, she is ultimately prevented from this new life by the promise to her mother 'to keep the home together as long as she could'.²⁶ Like Eveline, Bridie is the good daughter who keeps the house following her mother's death, and who denies herself the chance to emigrate and thereby escape the torpor of Ireland. Trevor's characterisation of the patriarchal role is quite different to that of Joyce's, in that Bridie does not live in fear of her father as Eveline does, but they are both nonetheless trapped in a life of servitude to an elderly father. Bridie might thus be constructed as a version of Eveline, a projection of what the nineteen year-old Eveline might have become by middle age in Free State Ireland. Both women fantasise about the life they might have as migrants, and what they yearn for is rather similar. In 'Eveline', the connection between marriage and social status is spelled out: 'Then she would be married – she, Eveline. People would treat her with respect then. She would not be treated as her mother had been'.²⁷ In Trevor's fiction, the link between marriage, motherhood and social sanction is at the heart of the story. If we are to read Bridie's story as a sequel to 'Eveline', the half-century between the publication of the two stories reinforces Trevor's point about how slowly social change came about in Ireland, particularly where women's lives and opportunities are concerned.

As with Frank in 'Eveline', Patrick Grady is rendered in only the sketchiest of terms here, making a brief appearance as the romantic male lead before disappearing never to be seen again. Other than this absent hero, the men in this story are all characterised by some kind of physical disability or lack: Bridie's father has lost a leg, Dano Ryan and Eyes Horgan both have sight

problems, and the only other eligible bachelor in the ballroom (a man in his fifties who enjoys dancing and is a teetotaler) is described as ‘the man with the long arms’. Physical impairment is a recurring trope in postcolonial writing, deployed by Brian Friel in *Translations* in his characterisation of Manus and Sarah, and by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, through the figure of Okonkwo. Both those authors use disability to signify the vulnerability of these emerging societies, whereas Trevor may be employing the trope as a way of indicating the damage inflicted in the aftermath of civil strife. The other men Bridie encounters in the ballroom are emasculated in other ways. Their immaturity is highlighted, for instance: ‘The bachelors would never marry, the girls of the dance-hall considered they were wedded already, to stout and whiskey, and laziness, to three old mothers somewhere up in the hills’ (194). Trevor’s depiction of Bowser Egan is particularly sharp-edged; his name connotes the slang word ‘bowsie’ (a well-known Irish term of abuse for an unruly youth) and the association between ‘Egan’ and ‘ego’ cannot be accidental.²⁸ Bridie contrasts Bowser unfavourably with Dano Ryan, whom she describes as ‘a decent man’, reflecting that: ‘Bowser Egan hardly fell into that category’ (196). While dancing with Bridie, Bowser exchanges ribald comments with his fellows ‘laughing so that spittle sprayed on to Bridie’s face’ (194). He invites Bridie to join him for a drink and then abandons her, leaving her to stand on her own at the lemonade counter while he goes out to take a swig from his concealed bottled of whiskey (197). Her comrade Cat Bolger draws our attention to this as a breach of social protocol when she observes Bridie’s solitary stance, and waits with her until Bowser returns.

Bridie’s encounters with Bowser in the past have all involved having to put up with unwanted sexual advances: ‘Often she’d been kissed by Bowser Egan, on the nights when he insisted on riding part of the way home with her’ (198). His persistent and clumsy advances do

not seem to be invited by her, but she seems unable to fend them off: 'he'd contrived to fall against her, steadying himself by putting a hand on her shoulder. The next thing she was aware of was the moist quality of his lips ... He'd suggested then, regaining his breath, that they should go into a field' (199). He later kisses her 'exerting pressure with his teeth ... the sweat on his cheeks sticking to her' (204); this is hardly the stuff of romance. The narrator goes on to describe how Bridie subsequently allowed Bowser's friends to use her in the same way: 'She'd gone into fields with them and permitted them to put their arms around her while heavily they breathed' (199). At no point is there any sense that she particularly enjoys these sexual encounters, and yet she does not actively avoid them either. Perhaps they afford her an opportunity for some kind of intimate embrace, the only form of attachment available to her. In one of the most affecting episodes in the story, when Bridie realises that she has lost Ryan to his widowed landlady, Mrs Griffin, she almost gives way to tears in the ballroom:

She wanted to let them go, to feel them streaming on her cheeks, to feel the sympathy of Dano Ryan and of everyone else ... She wanted Dano Ryan to put his arm around her so that she could lean her head against it. She wanted him to look at her in his decent way and to stroke with his road-mender's fingers the backs of her hands. She might wake in a bed with him and imagine for a moment that he was Patrick Grady. She might bathe his eyes and pretend (201).

This passage brings together sites of emotional and sexual release as Bridie's need to let go, to feel tears 'streaming on her cheeks', is quickly followed by the fantasy of waking in bed with Dano Ryan. The fantasy of release is characterised by the sympathy of others, and by gentleness of touch, the feeling of fingers stroking the back of a hand. She refuses the comfort of self-deception however, even in her fantasy life, acknowledging to herself that it would be a

performance. She extends the same acuity to her engagements with Bowser. Never deceived as to Bowser's character, Bridie coolly considers his motivation for taking an interest in her; she reasons that with his mother gone 'he'd want a fire to sit at and a woman to cook food for him' (204). Egan's selfishness and his need to assert authority is suggested by the way he offers her a drink but then takes the bottle back 'suddenly concerned lest she should consume a greater share than he wished her to' (204).

In the film adaptation of Trevor's story, Bowser and his pals provide a comic turn. In one scene, for instance, the three drunken knights bicycle tipsily across a mountain road bravely singing 'Ghostriders in the Sky'. Flann O'Brien provides literary forebears for such characters, injecting mordant humour into his depiction in 'The Dance Halls':

Nearly every male who goes to dances likes drink and takes plenty of it ...

This custom carries with it an odd accomplishment that no stranger can acquire. It is the craft of going out for twenty separate drinks to a pub 400 yards away without ever appearing to have left the hall at all. It is a waste of time seeking to solve this puzzle by observation. If you are a lady, you can dance every dance with the one gentleman, talk to him unremittingly in the intervals and yet you will notice him getting gayer and gayer from his intermittent but imperceptible absences.²⁹

By contrast, Trevor decidedly does not valorise these men or their alcoholism. Masculinity in this story is not constructed in terms of strength of character, virility or appeal to the opposite sex; the homosocial antics of the three bachelors indicates their irresponsibility and emotional immaturity. Meaney characterises this Ireland as a failed patriarchy: 'If official nationalism demanded Ireland be loved as a mother, and modernist exiles fled it as a suffocating one, there has always been another strand, not far below the surface and often in the same texts, that has

hated it as a bad father'.³⁰ The incapacity of Bridie's father might be said to mirror the impotence of the mid-century state, unable to provide economic security and a decent standard of living for its children. The Irish family, so carefully enshrined within the 1937 Constitution, has failed at every level. In a context of post-War of Independence emasculation, the only access Trevor's men have to the feats of hyper-masculinity associated with their forebears is via the silver screen, or for instance in the Wild West novels preferred by Bridie's father. The seductiveness of fictional cattle rancher heroes whose opportunities for feats of machismo were as limitless as their horizons, to an audience of small farmers confined by the stone walls and subdivided plots of the Irish midlands, is perhaps self-evident. Elizabeth Butler Cullingford explains the popularity of Westerns in rural twentieth-century Ireland thus: 'These images were attractive in their difference from the pious frugality of de Valera's ideal Republic; they also functioned as emblems of success within the Irish diaspora'.³¹ Furthermore, Trevor uses the Western here to invoke a contrast between the physicality and virility of the Western hero, and Bridie's father, a contrast that may also be extended to several of the other characters in the story.

While Bridie (like Eveline before her) chooses to stay in Ireland, the narrative is shaped by the emigrant context: Bridie may be read as a representative of those Irish people at mid-century who were 'left behind' in a period of mass emigration. Ireland has been described as 'an emigrant society' in this period, with the years 1956-1961 representing the peak of emigration.³² Bridie's beau, Patrick Grady, may be seen as an avatar for the lost generation of emigrants. The continued haemorrhaging of people from rural Ireland is later signified by the youth Bridie dances with after the 'Paul Jones'.³³ He tells her that he is saving up to emigrate: 'I'm up in the hills with the uncle, labouring fourteen hours a day. Is it any life for a young fellow?' (193). Oblivious to the gender-blindness of his statement and behaviour, the young man expects Bridie

to attend silently to his narrative and so remains unaware of her labours on the family farm, and of her relinquished opportunity to escape. Discussions about employment creation in the story are focused almost entirely on men's opportunities: the cement factory initiative in Kilmallock that provides much of the local gossip that evening, is discussed only in the context of providing employment for young men. There are several references to the fact that the factory is to be set up by 'Yanks' which could well refer to returned migrants.³⁴ Irish-American investment in the new state, as Clair Wills points out in her discussion of the 1939 New York World's Fair, was crucial to its economic survival.³⁵ Indeed a returned migrant built the Glenfarne ballroom in the first place, thereby completing the circle and providing the genesis of the narrative. Surviving in a harsh economic and emotionally barren climate, deprived of the youth and vigour of those who had emigrated, Bridie's decision at the end to throw in her lot with Bowser Egan may be read as the relinquishing of her own dreams. It is, moreover, a clear indictment of the failure of the new Irish state, 'the Ireland that we dreamed of'.

Trevor lays a careful trail through this story to explain the social paralysis of these people who have come together in a country ballroom on a Saturday night. In so doing, he elicits our empathy for their plight and asks us to look benevolently on the choices his characters make, gesturing to the limitations placed on them by hegemonic forces they find it impossible to contend with at mid-century. Adhering to the 'scrupulous meanness' of his literary forebear, he does not elaborate on these social structures, leaving it to his readers to make our own intertextual readings and fill in the social hinterland for ourselves. In many ways, this multi-layered narrative might be read as a palimpsest: set in 1971 yet suggestive of the hegemonies and atmosphere of the 1950s, it doubtless demonstrated to contemporary readers the sea-change there had been in Irish society in their lifetime. Pat O'Connor's film adaptation, televised in the early

1980s and set squarely in the 1950s, added another layer to this, targeting an audience who remembered their own dancehall days with nostalgia and for whom the mid-century social world was a dim and dismal memory. Reading down through the layers of these various texts gives us an insight into the affective lives, as well as the dreams and aspirations, of several generations in twentieth-century Ireland.

Notes

¹ All references in parentheses are to William Trevor's 'The Ballroom of Romance', in *The Collected Stories* (London: Viking, 1992).

² Following the film adaptation of the story, the Glenfarne ballroom became a tourist attraction; recently renovated, it is now back in use as a dancehall and museum of the showband era. Thus reconstructed, the venue re-enacts the romantic possibilities of the dancehall, a kind of heritage site for mid-century sexual licence, Irish-style. See Anita Guidera, 'Ballroom of Romance to Become Showband Museum' *Irish Independent* (7 June 2010).

³ A well-known impresario in the locale, anecdotes about McGivern may have sparked Trevor's imagination, and certainly feed into Pat O'Connor's film version. McGivern's Ballroom of Romance attracted acts as diverse as the Jimmy Shand Céilí Band and the Victor Sylvester Orchestra, who were famous in the UK in the post-war period. The highlight of an evening's entertainment in Glenfarne was the 'romantic interlude' when McGivern, in dress suit and bowtie, took the stage to announce the latest engagements and marriages originating at the Ballroom of Romance. He would then sing with the band, usually a romantic number such as the Jim Reeves' 'Have You Ever Been

Lonely'. In O'Connor's film, the compere (Cyril Cusack) carries out the same function, although bowsies singing a bawdy version of the well-known Irish-American song, 'MacNamara's Band', disrupt it. Information on the Glenfarne ballroom is gleaned from the discussion forum at <http://www.irish-showbands.com/history1.html>

⁴ Sebastian Barry, *The Secret Scripture* (London: Viking, 2008), p.138.

⁵ Dancehalls Act 1935. <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/1935/en/act/pub/0002/index.html>

⁶ For instance, brothers Albert and Jim Reynolds, with the financial backing of the Munster and Leinster Bank (now the AIB) developed a chain of ballrooms, beginning with the Cloudland in Rooskey, County Roscommon. Albert Reynolds, of course, later became leader of one of the main Irish political parties, Fianna Fáil, and Taoiseach of Ireland. For a detailed discussion of this, see Vincent Power, *Send 'Em Home Sweatin': The Showband Story* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2000).

⁷ Barry, p.140.

⁸ Nuala O'Faoláin, 'This Thick Excitement', *Salon* (21 June 2004).

⁹ Barry, p.139.

¹⁰ While these dance orchestras had a formal look, wearing dress suits and sitting at music stands during their performance, the newer groups like the Clipper Carlton dispensed with these formalities by the late 1950s, and, standing up with their instruments, they began to swing. The Clipper Carlton from Strabane, County Tyrone, was the best known and most professional of these outfits; they are credited with starting the showband phenomenon central to the 1960s Irish entertainment industry.

¹¹ Clair Wills, *That Neutral Island: A Cultural History of Ireland During the Second World War* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p.31.

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- ¹² The RTÉ radio documentary ‘Down with Jazz’ (1997) details these events.
- ¹³ Dolores MacKenna, *William Trevor: The Writer and His Work* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1999), p.210
- ¹⁴ *ibid.*
- ¹⁵ O’Faoláin, *Salon*.
- ¹⁶ Joseph Valente, *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture, 1880-1922* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), p.124. David Cairns and Shaun Richards, drawing on Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball’s anthropological studies, explain that the practice of ‘familism’, designed to restrict family size and population growth as well as securing primogeniture, emerged in Ireland as a means to avoid the land subdivisions commonly believed to have been a cause of the Great Famine. David Cairns and Shaun Richards, *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p.60.
- ¹⁷ Geraldine Moane, *Gender and Colonialism: A Psychological Analysis of Oppression and Liberation* (London: Macmillan, 1999), p.47.
- ¹⁸ Maureen Murphy, ‘The Irish Servant Girl in Literature’, in *America and Ulster: A Cultural Correspondence*, ‘Writing Ulster Series’ 5 (Ulster University Press, 1998), pp.133-148.
- ¹⁹ Kathryn C. Conrad, *Locked in the Family Cell: Gender, Sexuality and Political Agency in Irish National Discourse* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), p.11.
- ²⁰ Gerardine Meaney, *Sex and Nation: Women in Irish Culture and Politics*, LIP Pamphlet (Dublin: Attic Press, 1991), p.7.
- ²¹ Meaney, p.6. See also, for instance, Ailbhe Smyth, ed. *The Abortion Papers, Ireland*

(Dublin: Attic Press, 1992); Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, *Ireland's Others: Gender and Ethnicity in Irish Literature and Popular Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, in association with Field Day, 2001), Ursula Barry and Clair Wills, eds. and introduction to 'The Republic of Ireland: The Politics of Sexuality 1965-1997', *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, eds. Angela Bourke et al (Derry: Field Day/Cork University Press, 2002), vol. V, pp.1409-1473.

²² Kristin Morrison, *William Trevor* (New York: Twayne, 1993), p.145.

²³ Conrad, p.7.

²⁴ Denis Donoghue. 'William Trevor', in *Irish Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.215.

²⁵ MacKenna, p.141.

²⁶ James Joyce, 'Eveline', in *Dubliners*, ed. Terence Brown (London: Penguin, 2000), p33.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p.30.

²⁸ While the use of this term has softened somewhat in the contemporary period, and is today often used in a genial way, in the 1970s it was a commonly used term of abuse for a lawless young man.

²⁹ Flann O'Brien, 'The Dancehalls', *The Bell* 1:5 (February 1941).

³⁰ Gerardine Meaney, 'The Sons of Cúchulainn: Violence, the Family, and the Irish Canon', *Éire-Ireland* 41:1-2 (2006), 244.

³¹ Butler Cullingford, p.163.

³² Breda Gray's research on the 'Breaking the Silence' project at the Irish Centre for Migration Studies (University College Cork) is particularly revealing on this point; the

project focused on those who remained in Ireland during that period of mass

emigration. See: <http://migration.ucc.ie/oralarchive/testing/breaking/index.html>

³³ The ‘Paul Jones’ was a dance choreographed so as to have people mix and dance with a new partner chosen at random.

³⁴ Indeed, the term ‘Yank’ seems to have had a more general application in denoting migrants in twentieth-century Ireland, even those who did not migrate to the USA. In Cork slang, a ‘Dagenham Yank’ was a local who migrated to work in the Ford car factory at Dagenham in the UK.

³⁵ Wills, p.34.