

Adam Sumera

WILLIAM TREVOR'S SHORT STORIES ABOUT IRELAND

William Trevor is the pen name of William Trevor Cox, born in Mitchelstown in Co. Cork in 1928, a son of Protestant parents living in Catholic Ireland. He started his literary career in the late 1950s. He has been active both as a playwright and an author of fiction, being prolific in both genres; a number of his works exist in two forms: as short stories and plays (sometimes radio plays or television plays), for example, *The Mark-2 Wife* or *The Grass Widows*.

As a fiction writer, Trevor has written both novels and short stories. It is, however, mostly due to the latter that he has gained his position in the contemporary British writing. Some critics treat him as one of the most important short story writers on the Isles after World War II, together with Alan Sillitoe and Muriel Spark,¹ or V. S. Pritchett.² Robert Nye goes as far as to call him "a poet of prose fictions."³ Penny Perrick observes that his stories "are as addictive as Irish oysters; you'll always crave just one more."⁴

Trevor's characters are mostly either English or Irish. He does not seem to have any particular favourite location: it can be London or Dublin or some small town or village in England or Ireland, but it can also be Jerusalem or Isfahan. It is rather his interest in a particular kind of characters that connects his short stories. He shows sympathy for people who cannot cope with problems of life, who lose in the eternal battle against one's fate. He also dwells on the difficulties in communicating with other people and in understanding other persons' intentions, thoughts and feelings. There is warmth permeating his tales; though preserving a narrative distance, he is on his characters' side. He seems to follow the view of one

¹ Cf. e.g. Giles Gordon, "Masters in Miniature," *The Times*, 27 December 1997.

² Robert Towers, "Gleeful Misanthropy," *The New York Times*, 2 October 1983.

³ Robert Nye, "Breathing Life," *The Times*, 17 October 1996.

⁴ Penny Perrick, "Something in the Water," *The Times*, 30 June 1996.

of his characters, Frances, from "Autumn Sunshine": "It was weakness in people, she said, that made them what they were as much as strength did."⁵

One of the most striking features of Trevor's short stories is the fact that in spite of being really short – rarely exceeding ten printed pages – they create the impression of plenty; many of them seem to have enough material to fill a short novel. It happens due to Trevor's amassing details. Sometimes the reader comes across many remarks on items that might seem irrelevant to the main stream of the story – and yet it is they that create the effect of richness. Due to them, the reader becomes as involved in a wide web of events as if he were reading a novel. Let us take for example a scene from the story "Autumn Sunshine." Canon Moran, the main character of this tale, receives a letter from his daughter who has left his rectory to go to England. Between the information that the letter has arrived and the passage telling us about its contents we witness the following scene in which postman Slattery participates:

'Isn't that a great bit of weather, Canon?' Slattery remarked, winding down the window of the van and passing out the three envelopes. 'We're set for a while, would you say?' 'I hope so, certainly.'

'Ah, we surely are, sir.'

The conversation continued for a few moments longer, as it did whenever Slattery came to the rectory. The postman was young and easy-going, not long the successor to old Mr O'Brien, who'd been making the round on a bicycle when the Morans first came to the rectory in 1952. Mr O'Brien used to talk about his garden; Slattery talked about fishing, and often brought a share of his catch to the rectory.

'It's a great time of year for it,' he said now, 'except for the darkness coming in.'

Canon Moran smiled and nodded; the van turned round on the gravel, dust rising behind it as it moved swiftly down the avenue to the road. Everyone said Slattery drove too fast (769–770).

The postman will not reappear in the tale, so the passage might seem to be redundant. It could be partly defended on the basis that it tells us something about the leisurely way of living at the rectory. Such a reasoning, however, would miss the point: its main function is to create connections to what is, so to say, beyond the edges of the short story: there are narrative possibilities that could be pursued. The story presented to the reader is only one of many that could be told.

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From among almost sixty short stories collected in the omnibus edition *The Stories of William Trevor*, comprising in fact five of his books (*The*

⁵ William Trevor, *The Stories of William Trevor* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 771. Subsequent page references will be made in the text.

Day We Got Drunk on Cake and Other Stories [1967], *The Ballroom of Romance and Other Stories* [1972], *Angels at the Ritz and Other Stories* [1975], *Lovers of Their Time and Other Stories* [1978] and *Beyond the Pale and Other Stories* [1981]), the present paper will concentrate on four that deal with problems connected with Ireland's past and present. Ireland appears in several tales but mostly it is little more than a picturesque background to the events described there, as in "The Grass Widows" or "Teresa's Wedding." However, in those four it becomes important indeed.⁶

"The Distant Past" tells the story of an elderly Unionist couple, the Middletons, living a few miles from a small Irish town among Catholic neighbours. In a short retrospective introduction we are told that since the twenties the Middletons had lived a quiet life growing a few cows and hens. Despite the political changes around them they stuck to their views:

Twice a week, on Fridays and Sundays, the Middletons journeyed into the town, first of all in a trap and later in a Ford Anglia car. In the shops and elsewhere they made, quite gently, no secret of their continuing loyalty to the past. They attended on Sundays St Patrick's Protestant Church, a place that matched their mood, for prayers were still said there for the King whose sovereignty their country had denied. The revolutionary regime would not last, they quietly informed the Reverend Packham: what sense was there in green-painted pillar-boxes and a language that nobody understood? (345).

However, nobody seemed to mind their attitude:

In the Reverend Bradshaw's presence they rose to their feet when the BBC played 'God Save the King,' and on the day of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II they drove into the town with a small Union Jack propped up in the back window of their Ford Anglia. 'Bedad, you're a holy terror, Mr Middleton!' Fat Driscoll laughingly exclaimed, noticing the flag as he lifted a tray of pork-steaks from the display shelf (346).

Butcher Fat Driscoll was closely involved in the Middletons' lives: at the time of the changes he came to their house with a gun, locked them in their room upstairs and waited to shoot British soldiers should they come there. The soldiers did not come, and the Middletons kept buying their meat from Fat Driscoll; and he was glad to give them some mince for their dog when they came shopping, pretending that otherwise he would have thrown it away.

This peaceful living together of people with so different views is fairly natural to those involved but when seen from outside, it causes astonishment:

The visitors who came to the town heard about the Middletons and were impressed. It was a pleasant wonder, more than one of them remarked, that old wounds could heal

⁶ The stories discussed were originally published in the following collections: "The Distant Past" – *Angels at the Ritz and Other Stories*; "Another Christmas" and "Attracta" – *Lovers of Their Time and Other Stories*; "Autumn Sunshine" – *Beyond the Pale and Other Stories*.

so completely, that the Middletons continued in their loyalty to the past and that, in spite of it, they were respected in the town (348).

However, the idyll was not to last for ever. When the Middletons were in their mid-sixties the Troubles started. Soon the first British soldiers landed in Northern Ireland. Though the small town was some sixty miles from the border, what was going on in the North did not remain without influence:

On Fridays, only sometimes at first, there was a silence when the Middletons appeared. It was as though, going back nearly twenty years, people remembered the Union Jack in the window of their car and saw it now in a different light. It wasn't something to laugh at any more, nor were certain words that the Middletons had gently spoken, nor were they themselves just an old, peculiar couple. Slowly the change crept about, all around them in the town, until Fat Driscoll didn't wish it to be remembered that he had ever given them mince for their dog. He had stood with a gun in the enemy's house, waiting for soldiers so that soldiers might be killed: it was better that people should remember that (350).

It might be tempting to treat this situation as a starting point for a more general reflection on the situation in Ireland. However, Trevor continues the limited perspective focusing on the elderly couple. By concentrating on their isolation from their former friends, caused by the mutual enmity up north, he makes the story much more effective:

Now and again, he thought, he would drive slowly into the town, to buy groceries and meat with the money they had saved, and to face the silence that would sourly thicken as their own two deaths came closer and death increased in another part of the island. She felt him thinking that and she knew that he was right. Because of the distant past they would die friendless. It was worse than being murdered in their beds (351).

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Another version of the process of estrangement caused by the indirect influence of the Troubles can be found in the short story "Another Christmas." Norah and Dermot, an Irish Catholic couple, live in London. They left Ireland twenty-one years before, and Dermot worked as a meter-reader with North Thames Gas ever since they settled in London. In making their home in England, they had uprooted themselves. When reflecting on the impossibility of returning to Ireland, Norah thinks:

If she hadn't said they should go to England, if she hadn't wanted to work in a London shop, they wouldn't be caught in the trap they'd made for themselves. Their children spoke with London accents, Patrick and Brendan [their eldest children] worked for English firms and would make their homes in England. Patrick had married an English girl. They were Catholics and they had Irish names, yet home for them was not Waterford (492).

For a long time the family had had good relations with their English landlord, Mr Joyce. He used to join them on Christmas Day but it seems he will not this year. This is extraordinary because he sat with them every Friday evening and this did not change even when Irish bombs exploded in Birmingham and Guildford:

The bombings were discussed after the News, the Tower of London bomb, the bomb in the bus, and all the others. 'Maniacs,' Mr Joyce said and nobody contradicted him (492).

A change came after a comment made by Dermot following a television report on new outrage:

... Dermot had added that they mustn't of course forget what the Catholics in the North had suffered. The bombs were a crime but it didn't do to forget that the crime would not be there if generations of Catholics in the North had not been treated as animals. There'd been a silence then, a difficult kind of silence which [Norah had] broken herself. All that was in the past, she'd said hastily, in a rush, nothing in the past or the present or anywhere else could justify the killing of innocent people. Even so, Dermot had added, it didn't do to avoid the truth. Mr Joyce had not said anything (493).

Norah feels that Mr Joyce must have taken this statement as a justification of the killings:

Everyone knew that the Catholics in the North had suffered, that generations of injustice had been twisted into the shape of a cause. But you couldn't say it to an old man who had hardly been outside Fulham in his life. You couldn't say it because when you did it sounded like an excuse for murder (*ibid.*).

She thinks they should make it clear to everybody that they are against any acts of terrorism but she cannot find the courage to do it. Unable to convince her husband who cannot see her point, she wonders whether

... in twelve months' time, when another Christmas came, he would still be cycling from house to house to read gas meters. Or would people have objected, requesting a meter-reader who was not Irish? An objection to a man with an Irish accent was down-to-earth and ordinary. It didn't belong in the same category as crime begetting crime or God wanting something to be known, or in the category of truth and conscience. In the present circumstances the objection would be understandable and fair. It seemed even right that it should be made, for it was a man with an Irish accent in whom the worst had been brought out by the troubles that had come, who was guilty of a cruelty no one would have believed him capable of (494).

The short story, written in the third person but entirely from the perspective of Norah, ends with her reflection on Dermot and herself: "She would feel ashamed of him, and of herself" (495). Yet the reader's feeling seems to be different: it is rather that one must wonder why suddenly the Irish seem to have become a separate category of people. The sentence

"An objection to a man with an Irish accent was down-to-earth and ordinary," implying that a group of people have suddenly become outcasts, will ring in the reader's ears long after the story has been finished. Its matter-of-fact suggestion of mass responsibility must cause a protest on the reader's part.

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In "Attracta" Trevor deals more openly with atrocities in Northern Ireland. Attracta is an elderly Protestant teacher working in a village not far from Cork. One day she reads in a newspaper about the death of Penelope Vade. Some time before, Penelope Vade's husband, an army officer, had been cruelly killed; in fact, his murderers had cut his head off, packed it in a biscuit-tin filled with cotton-wool to absorb blood and posted it to his wife. Trying to show that she was not defeated by that act of cruelty, Penelope went to Belfast and joined the Women's Peace Movement there. This gesture was publicly reported and it enraged her husband's murderers. A group of seven men came to her flat and gang raped her. In desperation, she committed suicide.

This macabre story makes Attracta remember her own life: her mother and father died when she was only three years old.

The tragedy had occurred in darkness, at night: her parents had accidentally become involved with an ambush meant for the Black and Tan soldiers who were in force in the area at the time (598).

She was brought up by her aunt, but nobody in the whole town was kinder to her than Mr Devereux. She spent every Saturday afternoon with him, being also taken care of by his housekeeper, Geraldine Carey. It was only later that she found out about the past of the two persons when Mr Purce, a court clerk who had known her parents, revealed to her facts about them that, as he hoped, would end the girl's admiration for the two Catholics:

'There was nothing Devereux wouldn't do, there was nothing the woman wouldn't do either. They'd put booby traps down and it didn't matter who got killed. They'd ambush the British soldiers when the soldiers didn't have a chance' (599).

The change they underwent, the fact that they were so kind and friendly to her, has made Attracta believe that there is faith in life, that thanks to God's mercy men may finally improve. This is what she tries to explain to the children in her class but she fails:

To the children she appeared to be talking now to herself. She was old, a few of them silently considered; that was it. She didn't appear to understand that almost every day there was the kind of vengeance she spoke of reported on the television. Bloodshed was wholesale, girls were tarred and left for dead, children no older than they were armed with guns (604).

It seems that the times have changed, that the old hope is not valid any more:

The gleam of hope she'd offered had been too slight to be of use, irrelevant in the horror they took for granted, as part of life (605).

Paradoxically, for the children *Attracta's* story is nothing special because they face atrocities on television every day. Their parents, however, cannot tolerate the fact that she has told their children the shocking story of a decapitation and a group rape. As a result of their attitude, *Attracta* has to leave the school. For different reasons, she has not been able to succeed in communicating her idea of forgiveness to those two groups of the Irish people – the young ones and the adult ones.

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The main character of "Autumn Sunshine" is Canon Moran, a clergyman of the Church of Ireland, living in a village in Co. Wexford. His wife has died, and his daughters have started their own lives. One of them, *Deirdre*, comes to visit him to introduce to him her fiancé, *Harold*. *Harold*, an Englishman with a strong Cockney accent, turns out to be fascinated by Irish history. There is more than that: as Canon Moran observes, "Fascinated by Ireland, *Harold* hated his own country" (775). He criticises almost everything he sees there, sometimes forgetting that some of this criticism could be levelled at Ireland as well. However, what really turns Canon Moran against *Harold* is the latter's attitude towards the story of *Kinsella's Barn*. It happened at the end of the eighteenth century:

In March 1798 an incident had taken place in *Kinsella's Barn*, which at that time had just been a barn. Twelve men and women, accused of harbouring insurgents, had been tied together with ropes at the command of a Sergeant *James*. They had been led through the village of *Baharbawn*, the Sergeant's soldiers on horseback on either side of the procession, the Sergeant himself bringing up the rear. Designed as an act of education, an example to the inhabitants of *Baharbawn* and the country people around, the twelve had been herded into a barn owned by a farmer called *Kinsella* and there burned to death. *Kinsella*, who had played no part either in the harbouring of insurgents or in the execution of the twelve, was afterwards murdered by his own farm labourers (777-778).

While Canon Moran treats the story as a kind of local legend, *Harold* believes it to be a fact. He also insists that *Kinsella's* death was an act

of justice. Moran realizes that his attitude can be explained in quite a simple way:

Harold was an Englishman who had espoused a cause because it was one through which the status quo in his own country might be damaged. Similar such Englishmen, read about in newspapers, stirred in the clergyman's mind: men from Ealing and Liverpool and Wolverhampton who had changed their names to Irish names, who had even learned the Irish language, in order to ingratiate themselves with the new Irish revolutionaries. Such men dealt out death and chaos, announcing that their conscience insisted on it (779).

Disturbed by Harold's point of view, Canon Moran speaks about Kinsella's Barn during his sermon on the following day: "He tried to make the point that one horror should not fuel another, that passing time contained its own forgiveness" (779).

Canon realizes what Harold's problem is:

Harold was the same kind of man as Sergeant James had been: it didn't matter that they were on different sides. Sergeant James . . . had ravaged a country that existed then for its spoils, and his most celebrated crime was neatly at hand so that another Englishman could make matters worse by attempting to make amends. In Harold's view the trouble had always been that these acts of war and murder died beneath the weight of print in history books, and were forgotten. But history could be rewritten, and for that Kinsella's Barn was an inspiration: Harold had journeyed to it as people make journeys to holy places (781).

The only consolation for Canon Moran are the words of his dead wife who seems to be saying: "Harold's just a talker. . . . Not at all like Sergeant James" (782).

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All these four short stories discussed put people and human conflicts into the foreground; more general remarks form only comments on the events (although the comments are quite important). Robert Nye remarks that "Trevor has claims to be considered the most honest observer of contemporary Ireland at work in fiction today. Not for him the kind of overwriting which some would think inevitable in this context. It is just that he sets down about his native land a number of things which seem true to life, as well as strange to a foreigner."⁷

Characters appearing in the short stories have often problems in communicating with one another, in understanding the others' situation – and this may also include the particular situation of Irish people. What is more, they are often victims of external circumstances, of being involved in the web of history and in the consequences of historical events. Special

⁷ R. Nye, *op. cit.*

