

SEAN AND JULIA O'FAOLAIN: GENERATIONALLY CONCEPTUALIZING
COLLECTIVE MEMORIES OF TRAUMA IN FICTION

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Generation is one of the most important defining factors in one's understanding of history. As each generation finds its own way in the world, it conceives of its society's past in different ways than the previous generation did. Closely linked, then, to generation is historical memory. Each generation remembers history uniquely, and thus builds its own generational identity and response to events around them. In twentieth-century Ireland, these ideas of generation and historical memory loomed large on the national psyche. In 1916, the Easter Rising dragged Ireland into a new era: at first one of war and turmoil, then one of greater peace and stability, though still rife with problems and suffering from the aftershocks of war. Throughout Ireland's history, its exceptionally high caliber writers have chronicled and processed events like war, famine, colonial oppression, and their aftermaths. Two of these writers, father and daughter Sean and Julia O'Faolain, produced bodies of work that face head-on the unique problems their own generations encountered in understanding and coming to terms with the events of their shared history. Sean O'Faolain, one of the most high profile and influential writers Ireland ever produced, fought in the IRA during the War of Independence and the Civil War. Two of the biggest problems his generation faced were the trauma of war and violence, and disappointment with the failed aims of the revolution. Sean's daughter Julia, although more overlooked, is an extremely talented writer in her own right. She was born into an entirely different era and social context. Her generation, which came of age in the 1950s, struggled with Ireland's extreme social conservatism, and its history and continuation of female oppression. Both Sean and Julia reflect their own generation's conceptions and memories of history in preserving their own moments in time in their fiction.

I. Theories on Generation and Collective Memory

In 1925, French sociologist and philosopher Maurice Halbwachs coined the term “collective memory.”¹ This is the idea that essential parts of an individual’s memory are developed on a larger group level. This group could be a family, generation, or nation. Further, psychological and sociological studies have shown that the most powerful generational memories are made in youth.² This is called the “critical years theory,” developed by sociologist Karl Mannheim.³ The critical years theory is often especially pronounced in a time of violence or war. In his book *The Generation of 1914*, historian Robert Wohl writes about how this theory applies to generations of young men swept into war:

What is essential to the formation of generational consciousness is some common frame of reference that provides a sense of rupture with the past and that will later distinguish the members of the generation from those who follow them in time. This frame of reference is always derived from great historical events like wars, revolutions, plagues, famines, and economic crises, because it is great historical events like these that supply the markers and signposts with which people impose order on their past and link their individual fates with those of the communities in which they live.⁴

While Wohl is writing specifically about World War I, this excerpt applies to Irish history as well. Upon studying the works of Sean and Julia O’Faolain, one can clearly see that this is true: Sean O’Faolain’s works focusing on Irish history and historical events reflect his generation’s time of uprising and war. Julia O’Faolain’s writings on the same subjects focus more on issues people of her generation were concerned with: problems

¹ Nicolas Russell, “Collective Memory Before and After Halbwachs,” *The French Review*, Vol. 79, No. 4 (March 2006), 792. Accessed December 5, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25480359>

² Amy Corning and Howard Schuman, *Generations and Collective Memory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 6.

³ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

created by Ireland's social conservatism and repression of women, while still reeling somewhat from the trauma experienced by their parents' generation. In their fiction, both father and daughter attempted and succeeded in coming to terms with problems of conceptualizing collective memory specific to their respective generations.

II. Sean O'Faolain and the Memory of Trauma

Sean O'Faolain was born John Francis Whelan on February 22, 1900.⁵ As a young man, his education was imbued with republican nationalist ideals,⁶ which were highly influential in his political/military activities as part of the IRA, as well as later on in his works of fiction. In his late teens, John Whelan was so inspired by these republican nationalist ideas that he changed his name to Sean O'Faolain (or Seán Ó Faoláin), the Irish version of his name. O'Faolain made this change in a move to emphasize his Celtic heritage, as well as to revive the Irish language. Many other young intellectual republicans O'Faolain associated with during this time did the same.⁷

This kind of reclamation of Irish national identity was not only commonplace among young republicans at the time, but also among their precursors, from whom they drew a great deal of inspiration. Irish nationalists frequently seized upon mythology – which is intrinsically bound to historical memory – to solidify the image of the nation.⁸ For example, Patrick Pearse found in mythical hero Cu Chulainn “a figure whose sacrifice could inform the present and the future.”⁹ Patrick Pearse, of course, was an Irish nationalist revolutionary from an earlier generation who espoused the value of “blood

⁵ Maurice Harmon, *Sean O'Faolain: A Life* (London: Constable, 1994), 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁸ Sean Farrell Moran, “History, memory and education: teaching the Irish story,” in *Reading Irish Histories: Texts, contexts, and memory in modern Ireland*, ed. Lawrence W. McBride (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), 214.

⁹ *Ibid.*

sacrifice.”¹⁰ His legacy of violent revolution was continued by the many young Irish men like Sean O’Faolain, who were inspired to join the IRA and other paramilitary groups after the Easter Rising in 1916.¹¹ Of course, this trend continued for many decades. How was it possible that generation after generation continued to fight and die for the nationalist cause, when after each attempt such disaffection took place among the survivors? Ulster historian A.T.Q. Stewart suggests that “the recurrence of older patterns of conflict could only be explained by some ‘mysterious form of transmission from generation to generation.’”¹² Upon studying Irish history, we can see this pattern emerge quite clearly, and it is indeed a mysterious one. There appears to be some wordless feeling that comes with the nationalist fight for independence that links generations together, and causes them to behave in the same patterns.

Sean O’Faolain details his own experience in violence as an IRA soldier in the Irish Civil War in a chapter titled “The Troubles and My Trauma,” from his boldly titled autobiography, *Vive Moi!*. O’Faolain writes, “In my six years as a rank-and-filer in the IRA I shot nobody and was briefly under fire once. I have no war memories to record except to say: ‘Were those the Troubles? And if so was it a revolution?’”¹³ Although O’Faolain brushes his IRA experience off as somewhat unmemorable in these lines, he still uses the word “trauma” in the title of this chapter, which serves to emphasize just how terrible the Troubles were, and traumatizing for the entire country. This also shows how complicated and sometimes self-contradicting memory, especially memory of traumatic events, can be. Sociologist Jeffrey K. Olick points out in his article “Collective

¹⁰ In-class notes, 10/26/15

¹¹ Sean O’Faolain, *Vive Moi!* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1963), 184.

¹² Ian McBride, *History and Memory in Modern Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 174

Memory: The Two Cultures” that trauma is psychologically defined as “a psychic injury caused by an emotional shock the memory of which is repressed and remains unhealed.”¹⁴ Psychologists understand trauma as a phenomenon that blocks a person’s ability to construct coherent narratives about what has happened to him or her.¹⁵ Olick closes his article with the words, “We know well the dangers that can arise out of unfronted horror and unreconciled experience: personal violence, revenge, perpetuation of hostilities, blood feuds, and sympathy for extreme political solutions.” These words were written about trauma’s effects on societies generally, but they could easily have been written about Ireland specifically. Ireland’s history is one of trauma after trauma: war, famine, colonialism, terror, and violence. The country and its people were further traumatized by the events of the Easter Rising, and the brutal wars and Troubles that followed. These “unfronted horror(s)” and “unreconciled experience(s)” had a terrible effect on Irish society, which remained trapped in a cycle of violence for many decades, especially in the North. Over the course of his long career, Sean O’Faolain sought to make sense of the memories of trauma, and conceptualize some understanding of Irish history, especially regarding the Rising, the Troubles, and their results.

O’Faolain felt deeply frustrated with what he saw as a failed revolution, and questions in his autobiography whether the terrible sacrifices his countrymen made during the War of Independence and Civil War were worth it. This feeling is central to much of his fiction. Out of the destruction of war, a new society emerged that was conservative and stifled rather than liberal and free, ideals that O’Faolain and many of his fellow republicans had fought so hard for. Ireland also remained extremely economically

¹⁴ Jeffrey K. Olick, “Collective Memory: The Two Cultures.” *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Nov. 1999), 343. Accessed December 8, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/370189>

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 344.

depressed, and many of its people continued to live in appalling poverty.¹⁶ According to historian Mark Quigley, O’Faolain’s politics align with a “left-republican perspective that would see the Irish Free State as an illegitimate or incomplete product of the anticolonial revolution both in terms of its acceptance of Northern partition and its failure to address the profound material disparities within Irish society.”¹⁷

During his prolific career, O’Faolain channeled this major problem of his generation into short stories and novels. His frustration with the result of Ireland’s independence manifested itself in a unique, realist style. O’Faolain’s work was of such high quality, and he was able to connect to so many people through it that he became a hugely important Irish intellectual figure later in his career. Quigley writes that he “serves as a social, professional, or intellectual nexus for a staggering array of Irish writers and thinkers in the early decades of Irish postcoloniality, from Bowen to Behan to Beckett and quite literally anyone in between.”¹⁸ In 1986, O’Faolain was also made the Saoi of Aosdána, the highest honor in Ireland for the arts.¹⁹²⁰

While over the course of his career Sean O’Faolain produced major biographies, novels, and edited the influential literary journal *Bell*,²¹ in the tradition of James Joyce his short stories are perhaps his most effective form of writing, shining a light on Irish social

¹⁶ Julia O’Faolain, “A Snug and Needy Place: Modern Ireland, the Church and Sean O’Faolain,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 16. March 24, 2000.

¹⁷ Mark Quigley, *Empire’s Wake: Postcolonial Irish Writing and the Politics of the Modern Literary Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 70.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁹ Christopher Fowler, “Forgotten Authors No. 41: Julia O’Faolain,” *The Independent*, October 22, 2011. Accessed December 7, 2015. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/forgotten-authors-no-41-julia-ofaolain-1811030.html>

²⁰ “Annual Report 1986,” *An Chomhairle Ealaíon/The Arts Council*, 10.

http://www.artscouncil.ie/uploadedFiles/An_Chomhairle_Ealaion_1986.pdf#page=10

²¹ *Ibid.*

problems. O’Faolain himself remarked that his short stories were his “proper work.”²² It is quite curious that so many Irish writers of O’Faolain’s generation also excelled at the short story – for example, Frank O’Connor, Liam O’Flaherty, and Mary Lavin.²³ In 1985, Colm Toibin pointed out that Irish history itself “was traditionally seen as a linkage of short stories, emblemizing bravery, tragedy, and romance but providing no continuity and no legacy. ‘How can the novel flourish in such a world?’”²⁴ This sense of disjointedness extends to Sean O’Faolain’s disconnect, as well as the disconnect felt by many others belonging to his generation, between the goals of the Irish revolution and its outcome.

Two of Sean O’Faolain’s short stories reflect these generational ideas of frustration and disconnection in the new Irish republic particularly well: “Midsummer Night Madness” and “No Country for Old Men.” Both are set during times of war and violence, and deal with memories of the terrible events that took place during those times. “Midsummer Night Madness” was published in 1932 as part of O’Faolain’s first short story anthology, *Midsummer Night Madness and Other Stories*.²⁵ Upon its release, this collection of short stories about the Troubles was banned in Ireland due to what censors claimed to be its sexually suggestive nature.²⁶ Book banning was quite common in Ireland during this time, as government officials strove to reinforce and strengthen the country’s conservative status quo, imbued by the power of the Catholic Church.

²² Julia O’Faolain, “A Snug and Needy Place: Modern Ireland, the Church and Sean O’Faolain,” *Times Literary Supplement*.

²³ Colm Tobin, *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction* (Viking), xxvi.

²⁴ R.F. Foster, *Luck and the Irish: A Brief History of Change from 1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 163.

²⁵ Sean O’Faolain, *The Collected Stories of Sean O’Faolain, Volume 1* (London: Constable, 1980), table of contents.

²⁶ Richard Bonaccorso, *Sean O’Faolain’s Irish Vision* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 20.

O’Faolain was understandably extremely frustrated by the banning, which only fuelled his fire of contempt for Irish President Eamon de Valera, whom he had once admired²⁷ and praised in his first biography as “tall as a spear, commanding, enigmatic,” but sharply criticized in his second biography as being responsible for Ireland’s continued poverty and other social miseries.²⁸ It is quite likely that this banning was an attempt by de Valera and his supporters to squash criticism and political opposition.

“Midsummer Night Madness” is told from the perspective of a young man named John fighting in the revolution, O’Faolain’s way of recalling his own time in the IRA. Of course, Sean O’Faolain was born with the name John. The writing is absolutely beautiful, and flows lyrically akin to a prose poem. Imagery about the gorgeous natural beauty of the Irish countryside begins on the very first page of the story, as the protagonist details his time working for paramilitary forces during the Civil War, just as O’Faolain himself did. At the beginning of the story, John is traveling through the countryside, and describes it with the words, “Fallen hawthorn blossoms splashed with their lime the dust of the road, and so narrow were the boreens in places that the lilac and the dog-rose, hung with wisps of hay, reached down as if to be plucked, and under the overhanging trees I could smell the pungent smell of the laurel sweating in the damp night-air.”²⁹ These amazing lines show the power of Sean O’Faolain’s immense talent as a writer. O’Faolain himself was quite happy with the way “Midsummer Night Madness” and the other stories in this collection turned out, remarking, “This is a bloody great book. Hurrah! I read it

²⁷ Maurice Harmon, *Sean O’Faolain: A Life* (London: Constable, 1994), 105.

²⁸ John Montague, “Trespassers: A Memoir by Julia O’Faolain,” *The Irish Times*, October 17, 2013. Accessed December 6, 2015. <http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/trespassers-a-memoir-by-julia-o-faolain-1.1402958>

²⁹ Sean O’Faolain, “Midsummer Night Madness,” in *The Collected Stories of Sean O’Faolain*, 9.

again all over and loved it. It's *true*. It's simple. It's Ireland."³⁰ These stunning lines about Irish nature also serve to honor the beauty of the Irish countryside in a nod to the nationalist tradition that O'Faolain was a part of in his youth, and pulled away from after six years in the IRA. Republican nationalists would frequently focus on Ireland's special beauty as part of the push for independence from Great Britain.

An even more notable theme in "Midsummer Night Madness" is the relationship between an older and a younger generation, as expressed through the interactions between John and Henn. Henn is an eccentric old man who once belonged to the Anglo-Irish upper class, but has since fallen from grace. John has been sent to the countryside where he grew up to investigate his battalion's activities there, but stops by Henn's estate out of curiosity of how the old man has changed since he left home for Dublin. When Henn welcomes John into his house, he remarks, "I suppose you're another one of our new patriots? Eh? Eh? I suppose you think you can walk into any man's house and sit on his armchair and drink his liquor, eh? And threaten him if he protests against you for a cad and a bully, eh? You're another one of those, are you?"³¹ Interestingly, while John serves as a stand in for Sean O'Faolain himself in the story, the reader can see O'Faolain's own voice speaking through Henn as well when he criticizes IRA activity. The older O'Faolain's voice shines through here, one that has lived through the destruction of the Civil War and the disillusionment with the new Irish Republic. These feelings were undoubtedly common among many members of Sean O'Faolain's generation.

³⁰ Harmon, *Sean O'Faolain: A Life*, 96.

³¹ S. O'Faolain, "Midsummer Night Madness," in *The Collected Stories of Sean O'Faolain, Volume One*, 20.

This mirroring continues as the story progresses. Henn asks John why he's fighting in the guerilla war, and when John responds that it's because he believes in the cause, Henn scoffs, "I believed in things once...I had ideas about the people, the people on my land. I thought I'd get them to do things with their lands – I was ready to help them with loans and advice...Look at them, today. As dirty as ever, as poor as ever, as backward as ever..."³² Here O'Faolain levels a complaint at de Valera and his government through Henn. While Henn is a wealthy landlord bemoaning the idiocy of the peasantry, O'Faolain sneaks in a liberal, progressive critique of the government that failed to provide for its people in the way it had promised. This critique is most likely a major reason *Midsummer Night Madness* was banned in Ireland upon its release. As John spends more time with Henn, he begins to connect with him on a more personal level, despite all his flaws and misdeeds (for example, taking advantage of young women and exploiting his farmer tenants), not to mention the fact that they disagree completely politically. When the IRA burns a house down near Henn's estate, John runs out to confront the soldiers. He disapproves of their methods of terrorizing innocent village people, although he acknowledges that the men's "memories (are) full of the days when their people died of starvation by the roadsides and the big houses looked on in portly indifference."³³ Here we hear O'Faolain's critical voice once again, as John sarcastically taunts his fellow IRA men: "You're fine fellows. Oh, you're great fellows...You haven't, between the lot of you, fired a single shot in all this district in four months...And now you go and burn a couple of women out in the middle of the night. Oh, you're grand

³² *Ibid.*, 22.

³³ *Ibid.*, 37.

soldiers entirely. You cowardly mob!”³⁴ “Midsummer Night Madness” is a story of violence, failed revolution, and remembrance. O’Faolain criticizes the IRA’s clumsy violence, which he and many other people of his generation had once seen as brave and necessary. One of this generation’s greatest challenges was re-conceptualizing some of the ideals they held most dear, as well as their nationalist image of a shared, sacred Irish history. “Midsummer Night Madness” is an effective way of grappling with this problem.

Sean O’Faolain’s short story “No Country for Old Men” also deals with many of these essential themes, and, like “Midsummer Night Madness,” is set during the Troubles, and addresses the problems violence creates. “No Country for Old Men” draws its title from Irish bard William Butler Yeats’ immortal poem “Sailing to Byzantium”:

“That is no country for old men. The young/In one another’s arms, birds in the trees/--
Those dying generations--/At their song... Whatever is begotten, born and dies./Caught in
that sensual music all neglect/Moments of unageing intellect.”³⁵ Yeats’ poem is about death and aging, themes central to Sean O’Faolain’s writings on themes of generation and historical memory of Irish history. By taking the title of his short story from “Sailing to Byzantium,” O’Faolain suggests that the newly independent Ireland is no place for the elderly – the rashness of the struggle for independence and political power is a young man’s fight.

While writers of Sean O’Faolain’s time drew a great deal of inspiration from Joyce and Yeats, they also strove to find a new form of writing that better reflected the experiences of their own generation. O’Faolain’s contemporary and colleague Frank O’Connor explained that when he and O’Faolain began to write, it was “with some idea

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ William Butler Yeats, “Sailing to Byzantium,” Poets.org, accessed December 7, 2015. <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/sailing-byzantium>

of replacing the subjective, idealistic, and romantic literature of Yeats, Lady Gregory and Synge by one modelled on the Russian novelists.”³⁶ Sean O’Faolain also idolized James Joyce, and admired the cold, calculating eye he cast upon the Irish middle class and its myriad of problems, half-joking, “Bertrand Russell was right. Life is ‘Horrible! Horrible! Horrible!’ Once you accept this you can begin to enjoy it. Joyce did. He would hug his suffering.”³⁷ As much as O’Faolain admired this in Joyce, he could not be that cold.

O’Faolain wrote with much more sympathy and compassion than Joyce did, who almost viciously critiqued Ireland’s social status quo in his own short stories, for example, many of the ones that make up *Dubliners*. This lens of humor and sympathy, perhaps products of O’Faolain’s time different from Joyce’s, through which Sean O’Faolain observed the Ireland he wrote about helped to create O’Faolain’s own unique voice.

This casting-off of nationalist romanticism, especially the kind that idealizes violence and armed struggle, is clearly apparent in “No Country for Old Men.”

The story itself is set at a much later date than “Midsummer Night Madness,” during the border campaign between 1956 and 1962. The plot revolves around a raid by the IRA on police barracks on the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.³⁸ The raid results in the death of one of the young IRA men, whose body his father, Joe Cassidy, and father’s friend, Freddy Wilson, undertake a dangerous border crossing to retrieve. Joe and Freddy were both former republican soldiers themselves, and fought in the Easter Rising³⁹ – which would make them just the same age as Sean

³⁶ Maurice Harmon, *Sean O’Faolain: A Life*, 155-156.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 251.

³⁸ Michael L. Storey, *Representing the Troubles in Irish Short Fiction* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 120.

³⁹ Sean O’Faolain, “No Country for Old Men,” in *I Remember! I Remember!* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1959), 216.

O’Faolain. While the plot of the story reads like a romantic nationalist piece, in actuality O’Faolain adds supporting plot details that derail any possibility of an IRA-supportive work. For example, Joe and Freddy are both portrayed as ordinary flawed men, not saints or heroes, as they would have been in nationalist literature. And, of course, the idea of generational difference is essential here.

One of the most interesting parts of “No Country for Young Men” takes place when Joe and Freddy discuss the condition of Ireland. In this portion of the story, O’Faolain links the story itself to the title, and, just as he did in “Midsummer Night Madness,” cleverly transposes his own voice and experience with history onto characters who are actually quite different from him. Freddy wishes he could stand up and fight for Ireland once again, but realizes that “‘This country was made for young people. Nobody else but them can live in it, or die in it... This country is a cheat of a country for old men.’”⁴⁰ Joe responds, “‘Freddy, why was it that when we were young and trying to die for Ireland we all felt immortal?’ ‘Because time meant nothing to us....’ ‘We were like angels,’ Joe whispered, filled with awe.”⁴¹ The image of older men looking back on their youth is especially powerful in this context, as these two men look back on a time of war when they were young, and felt “immortal,” like “angels.” O’Faolain draws the story itself back to its title as Joe and Freddy ponder upon how Ireland is a place only for the young. Without the ability to struggle for the republican cause, these men feel they have nothing left. Joe and Freddy’s historical consciousness was cemented in their youth, when they were prepared to die for their ideological cause – as O’Faolain himself was. In his autobiography, O’Faolain writes that the Troubles were “both wonderful times and

⁴⁰ S. O’Faolain, “No Country for Old Men,” in *I Remember! I Remember!*, 230.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 231.

nightmare times.”⁴² While O’Faolain distanced himself from the IRA and from violence later in life, with “No Country for Old Men” he acknowledges the complicated feelings that arose for himself and for many people of his generation, who came of age in a time of great upheaval and violence, but also one of great excitement and change, and the promise of freedom at last. On events of this time, O’Faolain writes, “It is difficult neither to exaggerate nor to minimize when remembering such things...one tends to telescope them all in the memory.”⁴³ When these people grew older, they struggled to look back on the Rising and the Troubles with clear eyes, and to rectify how they felt about all that had happened.

III. This Is My Body: Julia O’Faolain, the Church, and Violence in Ireland

Julia O’Faolain was born in London in 1932 to Sean O’Faolain and his wife, Eileen Gould O’Faolain. The next year, the O’Faolains returned to their home country, and raised Julia and her brother Stephen there. Due to Sean O’Faolain’s controversial work and his criticism of Eamon de Valera and his government, the family was quickly made into “pariahs” in Ireland, and Eileen O’Faolain was forced to “save the family bacon” with her own writing, collections of Irish folk tales.⁴⁴ Julia O’Faolain was born into a completely different world than her father was. Not only was she raised as the daughter of a famous public figure, she had never known an Ireland under British control. Julia O’Faolain received an excellent education, attending “good fee-paying schools,” where her father pushed her to perform at a high level. Later, she attended the University College Dublin, where her friends noted the high amount of parental pressure she

⁴² S. O’Faolain, *Vive Moi!*, 178.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁴⁴ John Montague, “Trespassers: A Memoir by Julia O’Faolain.”

experienced.⁴⁵ However, her parents' influence also gave her a great deal of positive inspiration: in her recent memoir, *Trespassers*, she explains, "I write because Sean and Eileen did."⁴⁶ Julia O'Faolain showed great potential as a writer from a young age, which her father encouraged.⁴⁷ These privileges, along with a natural talent for writing, helped to mold Julia O'Faolain into a wonderful and highly talented writer. Although she has produced an extensive and extremely high-quality body of work over the course of her career, Julia O'Faolain has remained vastly underappreciated. This is a great shame, because her fascinating background as Sean O'Faolain's daughter, combined with her own generational context, has made for many excellent novels and short stories that could only have come from her own mind.

As with her father, Ireland and Irish society is a major focus in Julia O'Faolain's work. Unlike Sean, however, Julia came of age in the 1950s, a time when young people in Ireland were grappling with problems created by social conservatism. As much of the world was entering a new, more liberal age of increased social and sexual freedom, Ireland remained under the heavy influence of the Catholic Church. Irish society felt completely stifling to many young people of Sean O'Faolain's generation, and this feeling only intensified in his daughter's time. Sean O'Faolain publicly scoffed at religion,⁴⁸ and Julia O'Faolain brought her own problems with the Catholic Church into her fiction. The Church's history both in and outside of Ireland was hugely relevant to Julia O'Faolain and Irish people, especially women, of her generation. Of course, this continues to be a major issue in Ireland today, a country where, for example, abortion is

⁴⁵ Harmon, *Sean O'Faolain: A Life*, 183.

⁴⁶ Victoria Glendinning, "Trespassers: A Memoir by Julia O'Faolain," *The Spectator*, April 20, 2013. Accessed December 9, 2015. <http://new.spectator.co.uk/2013/04/writing-in-the-blood/>

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ J. O'Faolain, "A Snug and Needy Place."

still illegal. Julia O’Faolain takes on this issue of constructing a narrative of historical memory of the Catholic Church in her short story “This Is My Body,” which first appeared in her 1974 collection *Man in the Cellar*.

“This Is My Body” takes its title from the Eucharistic Prayer that takes place during every Catholic mass. This prayer, in turn, comes from the first transubstantiation, when Jesus turned bread and wine into his own body and blood at the Last Supper. During mass, the priest turns bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ with the words, “Take this, all of you, and eat of it: for this is my body which will be given up for you.”⁴⁹ The short story “This Is My Body” is set in an abbey in Gaul in AD 569. While it is not explicitly about Ireland, upon closer inspection, the reader can see that Julia O’Faolain ties many aspects of life in Dark Ages France to modern-day Ireland in a social critique. Julia O’Faolain remembers the Church’s past as one of subjugation of women, a past that has powerful effects in her present.

In this short story, O’Faolain spins the phrase “this is my body” from one of Christ giving his body for the salvation of mankind into women’s own reclamation of their bodies after the Church had made it its mission to take this freedom and power away. Here we see what is possibly the largest difference between Sean and Julia O’Faolain: feminist themes. Sean was not concerned with women’s issues, which is evident in both his work (almost entirely focused on men) and his personal life – he conducted numerous extramarital affairs over the course of his life, including one with writer Elizabeth Bowen, who later turned out to be spying on Irish republicans for the

⁴⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Vatican website, 1993. Accessed December 8, 2015. http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM#fonte

British government.⁵⁰ In one scene from “This Is My Body,” a young nun named Agnes worries that she is too tuned into her own consciousness: “ ‘I...’ thought Agnes guiltily. ‘Ego...’ It was a forbidden vocable. Her ‘I’ should long since have been merged and lost in God. The brief character should have been erased by her monastic vow, leaving her blank as a fresh page or her own white habit.”⁵¹ Guilt is one of the most infamous feelings the Catholic Church has inspired in its faithful over the course of its history, especially in women. Agnes feels guilty for thinking of herself as “I,” as a distinct individual, as this is “forbidden.” Here, O’Faolain hints that Irish women have suffered similarly ever since Catholicism was introduced to Ireland. As givers of life, women have a special bodily power that high-ranking Church officials have attempted to crush, as they see it as a threat to their own power. O’Faolain ends the story with an extremely powerful statement on how terrible the Church has been for Irish women. In the final pages, Agnes is raped by a man named Fortunatus, who excuses his violation of her body with the claim, “ ‘Agnes, *this* is the real sin: passion of the heart, of the mind. The body is unimportant. Your *mind* should be God’s.’ ”⁵² Irish women in particular suffered from this repression, as their country was, and is, more steeped in religion than many other Catholic countries (e.g. France, ironically the setting of “This Is My Body”). Women of Julia O’Faolain’s generation were beginning to see, understand, and vocalize this problem in a major, public way for the first time.

Julia O’Faolain’s most famous work, her 1980 Man Booker Prize nominee *No Country for Young Men*, is fascinating both in its mediations on the impact of violence in

⁵⁰ “The spy who loved Daddy,” *The Guardian*, February 3, 1999. Accessed December 9, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/1999/feb/04/features11.g2>

⁵¹ J. O’Faolain, “This Is My Body,” in *Man in the Cellar* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), 52.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 63.

Ireland, and in its parallels with great Irish writers that came before her: her father and W.B. Yeats. Sean O’Faolain’s influence shines clearly through in *No Country for Young Men*. The novel itself tells several inter-weaving stories of love affairs, a murder mystery, and IRA activity during the Troubles. Its title is a reference to Sean O’Faolain’s short story “No Country for Old Men” – itself a reference to Yeats’ poem “Sailing to Byzantium.” With her choice to title the novel thusly, Julia O’Faolain acknowledges and honors the great Irish literary tradition. She also contradicts both her father and Yeats with the suggestion that perhaps Ireland is really no country not for old men, but for young men. When Sean O’Faolain’s generation grew older, they mourned the loss of youth, and questioned whether their sacrifices in the War for Independence and Civil War were worth it. Many came to the conclusion that Ireland, with all its passion and strife, was only a place for the young. The generation that came after, Julia O’Faolain’s, re-conceptualized this collective memory. To them, the legacy of their fathers’ and mothers’ generation was one of violence, confusion, and repression. Many people, Julia O’Faolain included, yearned for an escape to more peaceful, liberal societies.⁵³ Julia O’Faolain herself fulfilled this wish, having lived in Italy and Paris, and today is settled in Los Angeles.⁵⁴ Perhaps as part of a nationalist republican point of view, however internally contested and complicated, Sean O’Faolain and people of his generation were far more bound to Ireland. In *Vive Moi!*, Sean O’Faolain writes that for all its problems, he was “forever bound to one green corner of the universe.”⁵⁵⁵⁶

⁵³ Montague, “Trespassers: A Memoir, by Julia O’Faolain.”

⁵⁴ Glendinning, “Trespassers: A Memoir by Julia O’Faolain.”

⁵⁵ S. O’Faolain, *Vive Moi!*, 180.

⁵⁶ Montague, “Trespassers: A Memoir, by Julia O’Faolain.”

While in “This Is My Body” Julia O’Faolain tackles the role of the Church in Irish past and present, in *No Country for Young Men* she takes more of a focus on violence in Ireland – the ancient and continuing the violence that has seemingly traumatized the country beyond repair. Julia O’Faolain suggests that this history of violence has made Ireland nearly unlivable for young people, for what future do they have in a country so torn apart by a traumatic colonial past and continuing sectarian violence? In his 1998 article “Forgiving the Past,” American writer David Mason points out that this was a generational focus of Irish writers who came of age in the 1950s and 1960s: “novels by Edna O’Brien, William Trevor, Dermot Healy, John Banville, Julia O’Faolain, Bernard MacLaverty, John McGahern, Eugene McCabe, Brian Moore, and M.S. Power, to name only a handful, have focused on the Troubles or on the strife residue of grief and hatred left by generations of strife in Ireland.”⁵⁷ Indeed, this focus is a major one in *No Country for Young Men*. Julia O’Faolain grieves for the state of violence in Ireland in a conversation between two characters toward the middle of the novel. A young boy named Cormac asks his great-aunt, Judith, who took part in violent republican activities during the struggle for independence what life was like when she was young. Judith responds, ““They (the IRA) said we were...No,’ she corrected herself, ‘they, *they* were fighting for a new Ireland. For the future...Oh, they had high hopes. In fifty years’ time.’ ‘That’s now,’ Cormac told her. ‘It is?’ ‘Yes.’”⁵⁸ This “they” Julia O’Faolain writes about included her father, who fought for “a new Ireland,” only to be bitterly disappointed with the results. Cormac’s “now,” the 1970s, was a time when violence in Ireland was very much a part of the present, not a historical relic Judith’s generation had

⁵⁷ David Mason, “Forgiving the Past,” *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 106, No. 2 (Spring 1998), 299. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27548521>

⁵⁸ J. O’Faolain, *No Country for Young Men* (London: Penguin, 1980), 140.

hoped for in their fight. In *No Country for Young Men*, Julia O’Faolain is concerned with Ireland’s trauma, with this “unconfronted horror and unreconciled experience”⁵⁹ – Judith, in her old age, is not aware that the fifty years have passed since her compatriot’s “high hopes” were meant to be made real. This is why Julia O’Faolain suggests her Ireland is “no country for young men” – it is damaged seemingly beyond repair.

In the introduction to his collection of Irish fairy tales, *The Celtic Twilight*, W.B. Yeats writes, “Hope and Memory have one daughter and her name is Art, and she has built her dwelling far from the desperate field where men hang out their garments upon forked boughs to be banners of battle.”⁶⁰ In their writings on Irish history, Sean and Julia O’Faolain not only spoke for their generations in remembering and coming to terms with events and situations that had happened in their youth, but also expressed hope for a brighter, freer, and more peaceful future. Both father and daughter critiqued problems like violence, political stagnation, and repression of women because they knew their country could do better. Sean and Julia O’Faolain’s writings deal persistently with generational collective memory, and in so doing, these two great intellectuals stood up for their generations and processed issues of how to understand a traumatic national past in a way that is conducive to moving forward. As we approach the hundredth anniversary of the Easter Rising, these questions Sean and Julia O’Faolain ruminate on in their works of fiction are becoming ever more relevant once again. Through art, today’s generation of young people in Ireland can also come to reckon with their all too often tragic national history, and its legacies of violence and repression.

⁵⁹ Olick, “Collective Memory: The Two Cultures,” 343.

⁶⁰ William Butler Yeats, *The Celtic Twilight: Faerie and Folklore* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2004), 1.

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