

THE REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE PROTAGONIST DIVERSITY  
AS DEPICTED IN THE SHORT STORIES BY MAEVE BINCHY

The magic of the short story genre cannot be underestimated. Novelists have a vast canvas for verbal adornment under their command while short story writers have but a few pages to not only provide a plot outline and etch their individual style but also to drive the central idea home. At that point a protagonist portrayal comes to the fore since the main characters oftentimes serve as an embodiment of the message that authors elaborately wove into a piece of narration.

In terms of a protagonist portrayal one may distinguish between how male and female writers put their own slant on it. There is a quote once stated by a famous male writer that now has become a catchphrase indicating that no one can fathom the depth of a woman's heart as well as a man. Undoubtedly, world literature knows multiple examples of female protagonist representations that now are treated as an instant classic. However, the latter may naturally stem from the fact that the portrayal of women in literature is a field that has largely been controlled by the male voice. With the course of time and fortunately both

for female authors and readers this has changed throughout the centuries. Since then a good deal of female writers have been enjoying their share of the limelight still there is one voice that deserves more attention as she was the one who accumulated the voices of all Irish women and succeeded in putting them through in 'a man's world'.

It is therefore only natural to dwell upon Maeve Binchy and her creative versatility in portraying 'the new look' of a female protagonist – strong-spirited and humble, courageous and considerate, desperate and sensible and eternally feminine. In a nutshell, a different, comprehensive image of a woman that is depicted without going to extremes – either acquiescent or stoically brave (two highly typed variants of a female character). A woman by Maeve Binchy is universal, the kind that one comes across every day in the street, in a local grocery shop, in the office, etc.; universal meaning versatile. In her creative endeavours Maeve succeeded in capturing the interesting, vivid complexity of womanhood which is unfailingly realistic. By doing so, M. Binchy served as a spokesperson and advocate for a woman in the world (literary as well) dominated by men. More so Maeve Binchy was in many ways a trailblazer depicting her vision of an Irish female character and paving the way for generations of her female successors to come.

Since Maeve Binchy was most successful in capturing a realistic type of a contemporary female, it may be of a certain interest to analyze such a character in its different roles, diverse facets and manifestations. Thus, in the short story 'Getting It Right' Irene, a female protagonist, is perceived as empathic at first sight. In that regard, she may be mistakenly type cast as 'dear' and 'little' servile female (the type common for Charles Dickens' narration). In fact, Irene makes it her point to put other people's interests above her own; in the episode when her boyfriend casually throws in 'Will we get married?' he asked, as if it was obvious. Her eyes filled with tears. He was so straightforward and honest. If you loved someone that was it – you got married.' she expects no romance on bended knee, if such a matter-of-fact proposal is good for Jim, it is enough for her. Moreover, Irene is a self-conscious person demonstrating signs of low self-esteem which is aptly reflected in the following line: 'Irene had loved Jim for seventeen months before he said he loved her'. To make things still worse now the protagonist is to meet her fiance's parents of whom she knows but a few facts. So far a reader witnesses a seemingly meek, shy, unprepossessing female character who in her inner monologue adds a few touches herself to her own somewhat bleak portrait: 'They [Jim's parents] might think her too lowly for their son. They must disapprove of her greatly.' 'Jim had been at boarding school, which made him a higher class than Irene.' However, the protagonist proceeds from emerging challenges as a starting point and steadily builds up a confidence that readers could not possibly expect from her. By the end of the short story Irene is still that sacrificial and most likeable young female and yet a new Irene who rose like a phoenix from the ashes of her fears of not being quite good enough for others. Not only did life's adversities fail to break the protagonist down but also they tempered her spirit

to the point that Irene now ‘...had an unerring sense of knowing when there was more to be said and when there was nothing more to be said.’ Thus, Maeve Binchy makes a point that women should not be taking themselves too modestly but rather ‘ought to behave, dress and think for themselves’ to succeed.

Departing from an image of a young woman in love Maeve Binchy takes her reader to another facet of womanhood that is being a wife. Set in the late 1980s the short story ‘The Sensible Celebration’ presents a forty-year – old mother of two Lorna. At first glance the protagonist seems to exhibit the already well-known and commonly-expected features of a loving, self-conscious, cautious female: ‘...in the view of their friends they were still [...] a very-well-suited couple.’ The budding traces of sensibility established in the afore-mentioned character in love Irene have now developed into Lorna’s undeniable common sense and practicality. And yet even though the couple ‘...had weathered the decade very well’, there is a peculiar sensation of something being not quite right between the spouses. Indeed, what seemed to make Lorna a good wife in her mind’s eye pushes the family to its evident detriment. Finessing the art of being ‘a good wife’ Lorna turned common sense and practicality into blatant perfectionism and obsessive comparing their family household with their friends’ seemingly less perfect families. ‘One could only measure one’s life by comparing it with everyone else’s. Lorna had been very good at the measurement game.’ With the course of time the protagonist lost herself in the pursuit of the ideal and is unaware of the impending family drama. Not only does Lorna neglect her husband’s dreams and desires, she also neglects her true not idealistic self. However, she enjoys that blissful state as in her opinion her mastery of keeping-it-all-together reached its peak. Maeve Binchy incorporates a third-person objective point of view passing no judgement on either the shortcomings of Lorna’s rise to perfection or the failing institution of marriage itself. The carefully planted symbols express it all: instead of a happy spousal chit-chat there are long silences; a cosy living room is divided by two separate sofas; a fancy mantelpiece never witnessed a fire; two successful children choose to be away all the time; the husband’s eyes look sadly at his wife. ‘One owed it to oneself to keep oneself looking well’ – M. Binchy implies that Lorna (and women altogether) had better busy themselves with feeling well rather than ‘looking well’ and staying happy rather than leading a sensible life which is only a make-believe.

Two female protagonists in the short story ‘The Garden Party’ exemplify a simple truth that sometimes one has to go full circle to get to where they belong. At this stage Maeve Binchy presents a reader with an image of a divorced woman. The main characters, Debbie and Helen, are two sides of the same coin. Debbie made it through a heartbreaking divorce while Helen finds herself unable to move on and stumbles upon. On the surface it is Helen’s image that may present a certain interest in terms of depiction as she is lost and lonesome in search of a way out. On the contrary, the other female protagonist, Debbie, exudes confidence and peaceful harmony. Still, it is considerate Debbie, not anxious Helen who is central to the short story. By carving out Debbie’s plot line Maeve Binchy makes it a point

that there is more commonality to humanity than not. Upon her own divorce the protagonist chooses to remain part of her ex-husband's life, a choice that quite a good deal of present-day women would make. Encompassing all 'good' features established in the previously mentioned female characters (Irene's empathic sacrificial nature, Lorna's sensibility and drive to perfection – Debbie is in need of being better than her rival) Debbie's character develops a new aspect of a woman by Maeve Binchy and that is insightfulness and self-complacency. A decade passed and Debbie faced the sad outcome of her choice – 'a surrogate family' as she calls it. The rewarding spin-off of the situation is that she is aware of, not delusional about her present state of affairs and is ready and willing to share her wisdom with a soul in need who her neighbour Helen is. Maeve Binchy herself once stated: 'I don't have ugly ducklings turning into swans in my stories. I have ugly ducklings turning into confident ducks.' And if that's what it takes to caution a woman against wrong choices in life, then let it be so.

The three short stories under analysis by the Irish short story writer and novelist Maeve Binchy supply a reader with a simple yet complex in its simplicity image of a modern woman. Sympathetic, sacrificial and self-conscious in love; sensible, practical and satisfied in marriage; courageous, compassionate and assuming responsibility for her own life upon facing any life adversity. Maeve humbly yet clearly insists that so far as writing funny, interesting, realistic women goes, it is down to her. And her female characters, in turn, promote the idea that it is only by overcoming obstacles and taking charge of their decisions that one can succeed and make their own life.