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ANOTHER "SCANDALOUS WOMAN": EDNA O'BRIEN, IRISH FEMINISM AND HER GÉBLER MEN

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ANOTHER 'SCANDALOUS WOMAN': EDNA O'BRIEN, IRISH FEMINISM AND HER
GÉBLER MEN

Jeffrey Patrick Griffin

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of Connecticut in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor Degree of Arts in English with University Scholar and Honors Scholar designation.

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ABSTRACT

Irish novelist Edna O'Brien suffered a tumultuous early reception; her first six novels were banned in Ireland, and critics complained that her writing was sensational and gratuitous. Yet by the time Ireland's economic boom arrived on the island, many contemporary critics suddenly applauded the novelist's writing. Is this significant change in critical reception based on O'Brien's development as an author? Or was O'Brien writing stories that were ahead of her time and only now accepted by contemporary critics? My paper considers the writing and critical reception of Edna O'Brien by placing her life and career alongside three waves of Irish feminism. I argue that the changing critical opinion of Edna O'Brien's writing is based on her interrogation of the problems affecting women in Irish society during the past forty years. It was not until recently that O'Brien had an Irish audience that was willing to hear her critique of a repressive Ireland, and it is this audience that is finally able to reflect upon the sacrifices made by early Irish feminists, including Edna O'Brien. In my analysis of O'Brien's writing within the third-wave of Irish feminism, I offer the first investigation of O'Brien's relationship with both her late ex-husband and son, authors Ernest and Carlo Gébler respectively. By examining all three family member's texts, I construct a literary dialog between the Gébler family, revealing the potential motivation behind each family member's writing.

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INTRODUCTION

Irish novelist Edna O'Brien was born on the 15th of December, 1930, in the rural village of Tuamgraney, Clare. A daughter of farmer Michael O'Brien and his wife Lena neé Cleary O'Brien, Edna O'Brien found the rural landscape of her childhood a significant inspiration for her writing. O'Brien's father was an alcoholic, and as O'Brien notes, her relationship with him "wasn't very serene" in that he "loved a drink and he was unlucky in that he couldn't drink very much without it having a disastrous effect on him, and on us" (*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl* 134, 135). While O'Brien "miss[es] very much not having had a tender relationship" with her father, she finds that her subsequent "tension and fear ... were the sources of my becoming a writer" (*Portrait* 134). O'Brien's success as a writer is surprising, she recalls that "[t]here were no books at all in our house. My mother was extremely suspicious of literature because she thought it was bad and could lead to sin" (*Portrait* 140). Yet O'Brien's intelligence and writing ability were quickly apparent. She thrived during her early years at the National School in Scariff, County Clare, and later earned a scholarship to study at the Convent of Mercy in Loughrea, County Clare.

While O'Brien found literary inspiration in the rural Ireland of her childhood, she notes that her love for urban life motivated her departure from rural Ireland and relocation to Dublin. After moving to the city, O'Brien enrolled in the Pharmaceutical College of Ireland, eventually qualifying as a Licentiate. Yet O'Brien's capacity as a chemist was limited not because of her intelligence, but because of her desire to write. In 1948, O'Brien began writing for the *Irish Press*, and soon after began composing the novels, short stories and plays that would make her famous.

In his 1976 review of Edna O'Brien's *Mother Ireland* (1976), esteemed literary critic Denis Donoghue reports that "Edna O'Brien, a famous and popular novelist, goes back to Ireland for a spell, a touch of nostalgia, a bit of grouching. ... The style is damnable, the language [that] of the Irish Tourist Board ..." (qtd. in Woodward 42). In 1989, reviews for O'Brien's new fiction were still far from overwhelmingly positive. In his *New York Times* article "Edna O'Brien: Reveling in Heartbreak," Richard Woodward describes O'Brien as extremely vain, particularly in that she was "more worried about the picture that would accompany the article than about anything I might write" (42). Woodward goes on to write that O'Brien

has not lived in Ireland for almost 30 years and her books show no mark of [Ireland's] current or political social conditions. The outside world rarely enters her tales of private sorrow and passion. She writes out of what the American novelist Mary Gordon calls 'that female, quite sensually experienced pain,' but O'Brien is no feminist. It's hard to say where she fits into contemporary letters or even to what country she belongs. (42)

No discussion of Edna O'Brien is complete without an exploration of the critical reviews and literary scholarship that focuses on O'Brien's merit as an author. The beginning of O'Brien's career was critically tumultuous, and while the denigration of O'Brien has lessened, biting commentary still surfaces in contemporary criticism. While even some of the most scathing reviews contain truth about O'Brien's literary flaws, Woodward's comment is completely incorrect, propagating the sort of criticism that has unfairly maintained Edna O'Brien on the periphery of the Irish literary canon. While I do not posit O'Brien as a perfect author, Woodward is both overly harsh and in places, completely incorrect. This paper will counter each of Woodward's (and other scholars') criticisms of O'Brien, particularly arguing against

Woodward's contention that O'Brien "is no feminist" and that she does not "fit into" either the Irish literary canon nor her native Ireland itself.

The first chapter of this paper, "O'Brien's engagement with the Irish Literary Tradition" begins with an exploration of the author's critical reception. Most notably, the chapter discusses critics' contention that O'Brien's life in London has removed her from an Irish literary tradition, and that she should be excluded from the Irish literary canon altogether. In turn, I contend that these critics' misread O'Brien due to their own discomfort with O'Brien's overt challenge to the patriarchal Irish government and her feminist leanings. The portion of the paper discusses the need for increased scholarship on O'Brien's writing so as to ensure her inclusion in the canon from which she has been excluded.

After this first chapter, the paper will begin considering O'Brien's texts themselves. The next three chapters will examine O'Brien's texts alongside three distinct waves of feminism in Ireland, arguing that O'Brien engages with each period and develops alongside Irish feminism. These three divisions include the post-war period to the late 1960s, the 1970s and early 1980s (particularly the Irish Women's Liberation Movement), and the mid 1980s to the present. These key periods have become increasingly accepted among Irish feminist scholars, for their divisions allow for easy consideration of the landmark social changes significantly due to the Irish feminist movement. The second chapter of the thesis, "'She went over the top': O'Brien and the First Wave of Feminism," will begin with an examination of the Irish cultural context during this period. I will consider O'Brien's texts written during the first wave of feminism, specifically the three novels of *The Country Girls Trilogy* (1960)¹, *August is a Wicked Month* (1965), and the short story "A Scandalous Woman" (1974). The reading of these texts will highlight the

similarities between first-wave feminists' concerns and the criticisms expressed by way of O'Brien's writing.

The third chapter of the thesis, "From Kate O'Brien to Edna O'Brien: Lesbianism and the Second Wave of Feminism," will first examine historical background of the second wave of Irish feminism, particularly focusing on the Irish Women's Liberation Movement. This section will highlight the shift between first and second wave feminism, particularly in this movement's criticism of women's subjugation promoted both by law (as in the first wave), and by subjugation caused by cultural prejudice (a second-wave addition). As such, the second wave of Irish feminism first allowed for the exploration of lesbianism, and O'Brien's texts reflect this new consideration. The textual analysis in this section will begin with an exploration of Kate O'Brien's "lesbian novels," arguing that Kate O'Brien's unprecedented writing allowed for Edna O'Brien to offer her own "lesbian" voice. The exploration of Kate O'Brien's writing will include the novels *Without My Cloak* (1931) and *The Land of Spices* (1941). The paper will then consider Edna O'Brien's short stories "The Mouth of the Cave" (1968) and "Sister Imelda" (1981), and O'Brien's novel *The High Road* (1988).

The final chapter of the thesis, "'It's All in the Family': O'Brien, Contemporary Feminism, and the Masculine Reply" will begin by offering a brief examination of the most recent developments in Irish feminism. Most notably, this section will argue that this third-wave of feminism has finally allowed for the inclusion of men's voices alongside those of female Irish feminists. The chapter will point to O'Brien's ability to grow alongside the feminist movement, examining her novels *Down by the River* (1997), and *The Light of Evening* (2006). The paper will then offer a relatively unexplored analysis of the writing of O'Brien's ex-husband and son, Ernest and Carlo Gébler respectively. The texts that will be considered include Ernest Gébler's

novels *The Old Man and the Girl* (1968) and *Shall I Eat You Now?* (1969); Carlo Gébler's *Father and I: A Memoir* (2002), "The Chekov Student" (1996), and "The Cowboy Suit" (1996); and Edna O'Brien's novel *Time and Tide* (1992). I argue that the three novelists fictionalize (or in Carlo Gebler's case, explicitly describe) each other in their writing, offering a "conversation" by way of their novels. This "conversation" is particularly noteworthy, as it reveals the tumultuous relationship between Ernest Gébler and O'Brien, as well as the difficult childhood Carlo Gébler lived as a result of Ernest Gébler's misogyny and tyrannical fathering. Finally, the paper will show that Carlo Gébler is a writer who has benefited from contemporary Irish feminism in that he can offer his own feminist voice, one that is very similar to that of his mother.

CHAPTER I

Edna O'Brien's Engagement with the Irish Literary Tradition

The Development of an Irish Literary Tradition

With the publication of *The Country Girls* in 1960, Edna O'Brien found herself in a tenuous position; she was Irish by birth, she wrote about Ireland, yet was largely not considered part of an Irish literary tradition, partially on the grounds that she did not accurately represent "Irish womanhood" (Carlson 69). After over forty years of writing almost exclusively about Ireland and its social issues, O'Brien has finally received the identification as an Irish author. However, the validity and literary merit of O'Brien's writing is still frequently challenged. A significant number of critics argue that O'Brien's texts do not accurately reflect real Irish issues, and consequently, her work should not be considered part of an Irish literary tradition. Even more startling, many rural Irish women completely misunderstand O'Brien's writing, and argue that she is neither an Irish author nor a writer at all, instead finding her prose gossipy and irrelevant. In Rosemary Mahoney's *Whoredom in Kimmage: Irish Women Coming of Age* (1993), a book divided into a series of vignettes based on the author's experience in Ireland during the late 1980s, Mahoney encounters Molly Cooney, the postmistress from Edna O'Brien's hometown in Clare. Mahoney's conversation with Molly Cooney is telling:

... Instead of being proud of O'Brien, she was bitter about her and scandalized by her work. She told me that her mother and Edna O'Brien's father had been in a hospital together and that O'Brien's father was always coming to her mother's room looking for bottles of Guinness. 'Imagine it,' she said, 'my mother who never took a drink in her life! And Edna O'Brien simply went up and down the

streets of that village and wrote down everything about everybody and put it in a book. You could pick out the people and who they were. Was that nice?’

I pointed out that James Joyce had done much the same thing, and Molly said indignantly, ‘That was different.’

‘How was it different?’ I said.

‘He was a writer!’

‘Edna O’Brien is a writer,’ I said. (210-211)

This attitude among an older generation of Irish women has persisted even since the early 1990s when Mahoney published her book. At the 2006 New England American Conference for Irish Studies, a prominent Irish historian sneered at O’Brien’s literature, arguing that “in my mind, Edna O’Brien does not speak for Ireland or Irish womanhood at all.” Before further consideration of both the popular and academic criticism of O’Brien’s work and whether or not the assessment has any merit, it is necessary to investigate the qualifications one must make to be a part of the tightly-defined Irish canon, a canon that many believe should exclude Edna O’Brien entirely.

In an attempt to determine the themes, narrative structure, and authors that define the Irish literary tradition, the work of literary theorists and critics all suggest one common conclusion: it is nearly impossible to find a concise agreement of what constitutes this tradition. Strangely enough, both critics and authors use the expression “Irish literary tradition” frequently, calling upon readers to decide the true definition of the term. In her article “‘Of Irish Extraction’: Translation, Selection and Re-invention,” Donna Wong offers a rather broad definition of the tradition: “The Irish literary tradition spans 1,400 years of poetry, prose, and drama. Some compositions are oral, others are written, most are in the Irish language, and many

are in the English language” (213). This very extensive definition indicates that an author simply needs to focus his or her work on an Irish topic to be considered part of the tradition. In his article “The Geography of Irish Fiction,” John Foster notes that the Irish writer is one who is “[preoccupied] with the past, without which Irish selfhood is apparently inconceivable” and that “the physical reality of Ireland has stamped itself heavily upon Irish novels and stories” (90). Foster’s definition is far more concise than that offered by Wong, in that he provides critics with identifiable characteristics of the Irish literary tradition. His argument that traditional Irish literature engages with the past, with Irish selfhood, and the Irish landscape itself allows for classification of traditional and non-traditional Irish texts.

While Maria Edgeworth has been credited for writing the first Irish novel, many critics find that the distinct beginning of a contemporary Irish literary tradition actually appears at the turn of the twentieth century. It was during the early 1900s when Lady Gregory, William Butler Yeats, and Edward Martyn spearheaded the Irish literary revival with the creation of Ireland’s national theatre. During this same period, James Joyce published his hugely successful *Dubliners*, and the Irish nationalists’ movement made front page news. It was in this atmosphere that Ireland’s burgeoning authors realized that prior to 1900, there was a general absence of truly Irish literature, and the literature that contained Irish themes misrepresented both the people and the country.² In his article “Yeats and the Irish Renaissance,” Phillip L. Marcus argues that James Joyce found a deficiency of a distinctly Irish literary tradition, as Joyce “decided early that there was virtually nothing in past Irish literature that could be of use to the supreme artist,” and as a result, was “careful to anchor all his major works from *Dubliners* through *Finnegans Wake* in the life of his nation” (413).

In order to create a national literature, many of the goals of the Irish Literary Revival are rooted in the Revivalists' larger concern of illuminating a distinct Irish identity. By utilizing wholly-Irish mythical characters such as Cuchulainn and Finn, the Revivalists use their writing to help forge a uniquely Irish story. Yet when these authors depart from the obvious Irish mythic references, they continue to define an Irish identity by discussing folk aspects of Irish culture. Douglas Hyde uses his early play *The Twisting of the Rope* to call for a resurgence of a Celtic culture, and the Revivalists' sudden focus on the use of the Irish language helps promote this distinct Irish literary tradition.

To a great extent, the close connection between literature and Irish culture determines which writing will eventually become part of the Irish literary canon. Kathryn Kleypas argues that by engaging with and analyzing the current Irish social landscape, Edna O'Brien and other contemporary Irish authors have placed themselves in the literary tradition pioneered by the Revivalists. In her argument, Kleypas indicates that to be a traditional Irish author, one must be an "analyst of the current condition in Ireland," in which the author's writing "redefin[es] not only Irish history and literature, but redefin[es] the very act of representation" (3). By using this definition in my paper, I plan to argue that O'Brien's engagement with the ever-changing Irish culture places her writing in the traditional Irish literary canon. Further, Kleypas' definition of Irish literature allows for an author with a multi-ethnic heritage to also contribute to the canon. While Ernest and Carlo Gébler's ethnic heritage is only partially Irish, their Irish citizenship coupled with their concern with Irish culture and identity qualify their work as Irish literature.

O'Brien's Challenged Authorial Identity

In the introduction to the book *Edna O'Brien: New Critical Perspectives*, Kathryn Laing, Sinead Mooney and Maureen O'Connor note that "[O'Brien's] status as a 'literary' figure, rather than a popular Irish woman writer with a history of controversial novels and a notoriously flamboyant persona, continues to fuel a debate within British and Irish scholarship in particular" (2). These authors pinpoint one of the problems propagated by many literary critics in that they confuse O'Brien's "flamboyant persona" with her authorial character, evaluating and consequently deriding her work based on the former of her two personas. Yet critics fail to realize that O'Brien's image enhances, rather than represents her writing. Coupled with her chronicled scorn over Ireland's social problems, O'Brien's powerful personality establishes her as an extremely influential literary figure.

O'Brien's "flamboyant persona" is only one of the critical complaints against the merit of her work. More pervasive is the critic's uncertainty as to O'Brien's authority as an author, with her writing frequently deemed overly-romantic and gratuitous. The stories published and marketed by Penguin Books during the 1970s and 1980s likely contributed to O'Brien's reputation as a sensational author. The Penguin covers depict seductively posed women in little clothing, pictured in hazy, light colors. Just above the title of *August is a Wicked Month*, Penguin added the caption "despite sun and sex," implying that the novel is a superficial romance with little literary value. However, Rebecca Pelan notes that "Anyone tempted to buy an O'Brien paperback based on the titillation promised by the cover, or by reviewers' regular mention of her portrayal of sex, will be seriously disappointed by the largely pedestrian nature of her characters' sexual exploits, if they exist at all" (25). O'Brien herself was frustrated with the marketing of her novels, noting that "I cannot say that the different covers for my novels have

always pleased me. Some have erred rather on the sensational side. It could be said that there is a big difference between an author's intentions and a marketing mogul. In fact I would love a white cover with black lettering to convey all" (Laing, Mooney, and O'Connor 4).

Living in London since 1959, O'Brien has garnered the identity of an Irish exile. This designation is troublesome for critics who believe she evokes a certain "stage-Irishness" as a result of her flamboyant personality and life outside of Ireland (O'Brien 474). Peggy O'Brien's article "The Silly and the Serious: An Assessment of Edna O'Brien," is a scathing appraisal of Edna O'Brien's work, in which Peggy O'Brien argues that Edna O'Brien "conflates the two stereotypes that define Irish Womanhood" and that in exile she is no longer an Irish woman, but a writer who "treads blatantly on her origins" simply to earn a profit (475). Yet Peggy O'Brien fails to realize that like James Joyce, Edna O'Brien often returns to Ireland and feels spiritually connected to the country when she writes. Edna O'Brien discusses her connection with Ireland in an interview with Helen Thompson: "I go [to Ireland] all the time. I could not have written my last trilogy without endless journeying, researching, and talking with people there. County Clare inhabits my thoughts and my writing wherever I happen to be. Ireland is always speaking a story and I have to search for it" (205).

The close connection between the critical reception of the Revivalists' early plays and O'Brien's writing further strengthens O'Brien's classification as an author within the Irish literary tradition, and helps validate the merit of O'Brien's work. After the Abbey Theatre's staging of J. M. Synge's *In the Shadow of the Glen*, Arthur Griffith, founder of Sinn Féin released a statement in the *United Irishman* deriding Synge:

The Irish National Theatre Society was ill-advised when it decided to give its imprimatur to such a play as "In a Wicklow Glen." The play has an Irish name,

but is no more Irish than the Decameron. It is a staging of a corrupt version of that world-wide libel on womankind—the “Widow of Ephesus,” which was made current by the hedge-schoolmaster ... Mr. Synge’s play purports to attack “our Irish institution, the love-less marriage”—a reprehensible institution but not one peculiar to Ireland. We believe the loveless marriage is something of an institution in France and Germany and even in the superior country across the way ... (Qtd. in Krause 400).

Because Synge’s play represented an Ireland that was not in accord with the idealized, repressive Catholic values, the writing was deemed “corrupt” and “libel,” and an attack on the country itself. This early disagreement between the Revivalists and political nationalists can be likened to the Irish Censorship Board’s contention with O’Brien’s work nearly sixty years later. Since O’Brien challenged the idealized image of the woman as written in de Valera’s constitution, she was scorned and her authority as an Irish writer was dismissed.

It was not long before the Revivalists’ literary merit was recognized, and contemporary scholars rarely argue against the inclusion of Synge, Yeats, Gregory, and O’Casey in the Irish literary canon. In a review of David H. Greene and Edward M. Stephen’s *J. M. Synge*, W. R. Rodgers refers to Synge’s negative critical reception: “A writer’s first duty to his country is disloyalty, and Synge did his duty in Ireland in presenting her as he found her and not as she wished to be found” (qtd in Krause 400). Roberts would likely contend that O’Brien fulfilled her duty as a writer since her representation of Ireland is not the idealized image promised by Eamonn de Valera (an Ireland with colleens dancing at every crossroad), but the country she observed during her early life in Clare³.

In the sixty years separating the writing of the canonical Revivalists and O'Brien, the country's repressive agrarian values, promoted by the church and government, only increased.

As a result, a career as an Irish author became increasingly difficult, as Marcus notes

After the Civil War the problem took on a new dimension as the internal concessions required to establish the Free State added to the already great power of the Church, which in turn produced pervasive, often tasteless shows of piety, a repressive sexual code, literary censorship, and a tremendous loss of 'life' and vitality. Irish society became antipathetic to many Irish writers, and their works often reveal extreme antagonism towards it. (412-413)

O'Brien's negative reception and her irritation with the censorship of her first six novels reaffirms Marcus' argument, positing Irish society as a repressed and stagnant forum for its writers.

Rebecca Pelan argues that it is logical that O'Brien's rather revolutionary writing would receive a difficult reception, as the Church's post-1922 values combined with a resurgence of conservative thought during the 1950s:

As an Irish woman writer, O'Brien inherited a nationality, a gender and a literary tradition, all of which carry expectations of conformity over which the individual has limited control. In their focus on singular readings of her work, critics have ignored so many other aspects of O'Brien's writing, not least her acute consciousness of form as a vital means of reworking an Irish literary tradition that she is part of, and yet stands aloof from: a tradition that has not embraced women, either as real women or as writers (25).

Pelan's analysis offers great insight into O'Brien's turbulent early career. Because members of a pre-1960s Irish literary tradition were either men or women who rarely challenged the status-quo, O'Brien's confrontation with the repressive society shocked the conservative and seemingly unchallenged country. Yet as Pelan accurately notes, once critics overcome the shock of O'Brien's frank rejection of the repressive patriarchal values, her writing is shown to engage with the "Irish literary tradition that she is a part of." In an Ireland where economic changes also ushered in a more liberal generation of critics, O'Brien's writing is seen more favorably, and she is finally beginning to receive the credit that was withheld for over forty years of writing.

CHAPTER II

‘She went over the top’: First Wave Feminism and O’Brien’s Early Writing

First Wave of Feminism

As discussed in the opening chapter, O’Brien’s early career was filled with controversy. The Irish critics of the 1960s were outraged by the author’s representation of the sexuality of her female protagonists and were quick to deride both O’Brien and her writing. However, contemporary scholarship and criticism reveals that the overt sexual passages are not gratuitous; instead they illuminate the very human qualities of O’Brien’s female protagonists while showcasing the women’s repression in the grip of a strict Irish patriarchy. By examining the representation of sexuality in O’Brien’s texts alongside three distinct waves of feminism in Ireland, O’Brien’s motivation behind her inclusion of “sexual passages” becomes increasingly clear. While critics offer varying definitions of the years that constitute each wave of feminism, most recent Irish feminist scholarship points to three very distinct periods: post-war period to the late 1960s, the 1970s and early 1980s (particularly the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement), and the mid 1980s to the present.⁴ Of course, dividing history into such distinct periods precludes discussion of other important issues in Ireland’s history, but for the purpose of examining O’Brien’s texts in light of the feminist movement, these divisions will prove to be extremely useful.

The first wave of feminism in Ireland began sporadically. It would be unfair to conclude that the feminist movement’s significant accomplishments were realized in the 1950s and 60s alone. In reality, the women engaging in both politics and the literary revival of the early 1900s are important forerunners to the formation of the burgeoning Irish feminist movement. The pre-

feminist days in Ireland are difficult to pinpoint; Irish history texts offer only cursory glances of the women's political accomplishments. By focusing exclusively on only the most famous and outspoken Irish women in the early twentieth century, Irish historians' marginalization of the work of less famous Irish women has kept the record of women's accomplishments out of Irish history texts. Margaret MacCurtain, a historian who has focused her career on uncovering women's contributions to the formation of the Irish Republic, notes that many noteworthy women of the early twentieth century Ireland are unheard of, simply due to the lack of published material on these women's achievements. Because of this absence of scholarship on early feminist achievements, contemporary women "were finding it difficult to learn about their historical identity or their historical role in the country" (qtd. in Ferriter 174). On the other hand, in his book *Ireland 1912-85*, Joe Lee argues that the relative absence of women's inclusion in Irish history writing is appropriate because "suggest[ing] women had undue influence would be to impose a modern politically correct contention on the past situation where it did not exist" (Ferriter 174). Diarmaid Ferriter counters Lee, simply stating that "The abundant documentary evidence does not support [Lee's] contention" (174). While both Ferriter and Lee are unable to offer conclusive evidence for either argument, the contentious discourse does offer one concrete conclusion: Irish history texts include significantly more information regarding Irish men's historical contributions than women's contributions to Irish (mainly nationalist) politics.

Margaret MacCurtain's 1978 collection of essays on women's accomplishments in Ireland encouraged further scholarship and research that finally gave the relatively undocumented women "their due recognition in the 1980s and 1990s following a long period of neglect" (qtd in Ferriter 174). The new research (particularly MacCurtain's essays as well as her co-editing of the unprecedented 1700-page fifth-volume of the *Field Day Anthology* which

focuses on “Irish Women’s Writing and Traditions”) provides an increasingly traceable history of early Irish feminist accomplishments, with the earliest sign of a feminist movement situated in the decades immediately following the famine. Life during the second half of the nineteenth century in Ireland was dismal: the famine ravaged the country, spurring a massive emigration that lasted through the beginning of the twentieth century. Diarmaid Ferriter notes that “By 1911 one third of all people born in Ireland were living elsewhere. The figures were truly remarkable – by the last decade of the nineteenth century only three fifths of those born in Ireland were still at home, and three million were overseas, and return migration was rare” (44). The ramifications of the massive emigration were profound: the marriage pool was dramatically decreased, and the economy was crushed. Yet when the depressing state of affairs slowly turned around during the early twentieth century, the country had the opportunity to significantly reinvent itself. Women took advantage of this re-growth, finding themselves steadily gaining freedom they never enjoyed during the nineteenth century. In 1876 an Irish Suffrage Society was established, in 1896 the more powerful Dublin Women’s Suffrage Association appeared, and finally, in 1908 the Irish Women’s Franchise League promoted a “more militant and vigorous campaign for the vote” (Ferriter 74). The importance of women’s contribution to the reconstruction of Ireland was soon noticed, as they “established hospitals, schools and orphanages on an unprecedented scale ...” (Ferriter 73).

This slow acquisition of power fueled both women’s involvement in the Irish literary revival and granted them entrance to a political world once known only to men. Maud Gonne, an Irish woman whose wealth allowed her to famously engage in Irish public life in early 1900s, began *Inghinidhe Na hÉireann* (daughters of Erin), an organization that “aimed at [promoting] Irish independence in all spheres of life: political, economic, and cultural” (Ferriter 75). This

women's group exposed the necessity of women's presence in Irish public life, as Inghinidhe Na hÉireann members quickly became crucial contributors to the establishment of Ireland's political and social wellbeing.

Yet the presence of the Catholic Church began to undermine Irish women's slow attainment of public power. In 1900, nearly seventy-five percent of the country was Catholic, and the Church's increasing power in Ireland allowed it to overtake the building of "hospitals, schools and orphanages" once championed by individual women and women's organizations (Ferriter 73). Ferriter argues that "the Church exploited the new-found prosperity of many of its adherents – particularly the middling farmers and shopkeepers – and indulged in a veritable orgy of church-building as well as setting up schools, orphanages and libraries" (83). The power and money behind the Church allowed its orphanages and schools to overtake those built by the Irish Women's Franchise League. Within a short time, the Catholic Church had an overpowering presence in Ireland, as Diarmaid Ferriter notes:

It is undoubtedly significant that those who grew to adulthood in the early twentieth century were brought up in an era when the Church was thriving, directing, often controlling and nearly always educating. This created a culture dominated by a Catholic world view that was profoundly pessimistic on some levels, and whose chief intellectual mentors were the Catholic priests of Ireland who placed a strong emphasis on the values of the farm society. (83)

The Catholic Church's "strong emphasis on the values of the farm society" directly affected Irish women: no longer would their involvement in public life be tolerated, but they were instead expected to work exclusively in the home, the only place the church felt that women could contribute to this agrarian society. The characteristics of the Catholic Church that Ferriter

describes as “thriving, directing, often controlling” are the same qualities that fuel the contentious discussion during the Christmas dinner scene in Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. While the Catholic Church enjoyed fairly unquestioned authority during the beginning of the twentieth century, Joyce’s commentary suggests the public’s early unease with the interweaving of politics and the Church of early twentieth-century Irish life.

The diminishing power of the woman in Irish public life continued during the Irish Civil War, and was eventually written into history upon the inception of the deValeran constitution of 1937. The notorious Article 41 places the family as the most important aspect of Irish life, as it declares that “The State recognizes the family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law.” The constitution goes on to posit the woman as the center of domestic life: “In particular, the state recognizes that by her life within the home, woman gives to the state a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The State shall, therefore, 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” (41.2-41.3). Although some women were content with their life in the home (finding their role as homemaker was as important as work outside the house), early first-wave feminists found the government’s insistence on women maintaining this role problematic. The early achievement of women in public life during the early twentieth century was crushed by the constitution, as women’s subjugation was suddenly written into Irish law.

The constitution itself reveals a significant number of post-1922 values in Irish society, many of which are challenged by authors writing after the writing of the document. DeValera makes an implicit connection with the Republic and the Catholic Church, as Kleypas argues that

“The authority of the Roman Catholic Church was relatively unquestioned; its presence was constantly reinforced by the presence of an inordinate amount of clergy members whose pastoral and educational work tended to inculcate passive attitudes among Irish women” (12). The close connection between the Irish government and the Roman Catholic Church allowed it to imbue its values upon the people of Ireland. Terence Brown notes that:

Occupying a role in Irish life that made it an integral part of that life, [the Church] enjoyed the unswerving loyalty of the great mass of people. In the 1920s it used that authoritative position in Irish society to preach a sexual morality of severe restrictiveness, confirming the mores and attitudes of a nation of farmers and shop-keepers, denouncing all developments in a society that might have threatened a rigid conformism in a strictly enforced sexual code (39).

The cultural emphasis on the protection of the family within Ireland’s agrarian society was firmly rooted in both the preaching of the Church and the language of the constitution. After the formation of the constitution of 1937, women found their early hope of agency stifled, and it was not until the Irish women’s liberation movement of the late 1960s that women’s voices began to reemerge.

Although the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement began in the late 1960s, the need for change was outlined during the 1950s and early 60s by Irish women in the workforce, particularly those frustrated with the economic limitations placed upon them. In her article “Gender Politics and Ireland,” Jane Gray notes that “Determined women were working towards gender equality in Ireland in different ways long before the ‘opening’ of the economy in the 1960s and before the founding of the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement, which is often credited with initiating the feminist movement in Ireland in 1970” (241). It was by way of the

working women's frustration over the unfairness of pay discrepancies and the "marriage bar," a law that prohibited married women from participation in the civil service, that the Irish Women's Liberation Movement was instigated.

It was not until the 1960s that Ireland (as well as England and the United States) saw a significant increase in the momentum of the feminist movement. Angela Carter argues that the unique social atmosphere of the 1960s allowed women's voices to finally be heard:

there is a tendency to underplay, even devalue the experience of the 1960s, especially for women, but towards the end of the decade there was a brief period of public philosophical awareness that occurs only very occasionally in human history; when, truly, it felt like Year One, that all that was holy was in the process of being profaned and we were attempting to grapple with the real relations of human beings. (70)

Although early 1960s Ireland did not yet achieve the "philosophical awareness" the latter portion of the decade enjoyed, Edna O'Brien voiced her concerns with these issues in *The Country Girls* (1960), showing herself to be an early and powerful voice in the feminist movement. Due to the relative absence of feminist discourse prior to the 1960s, O'Brien truly enters the movement at "Year One," ready to attack the most crucial women's issues in Ireland. O'Brien's first and main concern is questioning the Irish masculine hegemony that subjugated women so severely, propagating the notion that an Irish women's place is in the home, where she can fulfill her constitutionally-mandated responsibility as the center (but not head) of the family.

Ireland's reception of O'Brien's early novels was famously unforgiving. Her first six novels were banned in Ireland upon their publication, and the church in her hometown of Tuamgraney, Clare, staged a public burning. In an article on O'Brien in the Irish Times on 21

November, 1966, Bruce Arnold wrote that “Edna O’Brien’s concern has been with the presentation of sex as a mixture of the furtive, the absurd, the inconsequential and the humorous adjunct to human endeavor. It has rarely been a question of passion. It has been exhibitionistic.”⁵ Arnold condemns O’Brien by misreading her text; he claims that the sexual content is superfluous and “absurd,” while in reality the brief sexual content is necessary in the context of O’Brien’s social critique. While the censorship certainly damaged O’Brien’s self-confidence as an author, it also exposed a country whose stilted mores needed to be challenged.

In an interview with Julia Carlson, O’Brien comments on the effect of the banning of her first six novels. She believes that the main ground for banning was centered upon the sexuality within the texts:

...it was about the covert and the no-so-covert, rather foolish sexuality of two young girls. It was their romance and their sexuality because Baba was sex and Cait was romance. I admitted their sexuality, also unhappy married life—a young girl yearning and, indeed, eventually having sex with a much older married man (71).

Yet those who promoted the censorship of O’Brien’s novels missed her objective. Like Arnold, the censors felt that O’Brien’s writing was “pornographic and obscene” (Colletta and O’Connor 4). In response to the banning, O’Brien notes that her critics wish to see women represented as “devoid of sexual desires, maternal, devout, attractive” (Carlson 76). O’Brien retells the censors’ response with her refusal to conform to the country’s standards:

I offended several fashions. I offended the Catholic Church. I betrayed Irish womanhood. They even used that phrase—I was a ‘smear on Irish womanhood.’ I

betrayed my own community by writing about their world. I showed two Irish girls full of yearnings and desires. Wicked! (Carlson 76).

O'Brien is rightfully sarcastic when she calls her writing "wicked," since the censors' contempt for her novels is wholly ironic. O'Brien describes women's sexual desire and romantic attachments not to "betray Irish womanhood," but rather to help liberate women caught in a severely stifling culture. Even further, O'Brien's texts have relatively few occurrences of sexually explicit words. In *The Country Girls*, Sean McMahon observes that "in a story of 70,000 words 3000 at most might deal directly with sex" (qtd. In Eckely 14). O'Brien replies to McMahon's assessment, arguing that "if these 3000 are pored over to the virtual exclusion of the other 67,000 whose fault is that?" (14).

The representation of her protagonists' sexuality is essential to the messages within each of O'Brien's texts. Far from "pornography," these passages shed light upon the repression of Irish women, where subjugation was promoted by article 41.2 of the constitution in its assertion "that the most important and valuable contribution a woman could make to Irish society was by her life in the home" (Ferriter 420). Helen Thompson argues that "In O'Brien's work we see that the Irish patriarchy is anxious to control women's sexual and reproductive roles because by limiting women they maintain the semblance of masculine dominance" (31). The threat of censorship and government disapproval only encouraged O'Brien, an author who "in all of her work, points to the seams where women cannot and will not be contained" (Thompson 31). In light of the strict patriarchal society of 1960s Ireland, it becomes increasingly clear that the critics' incredulity with the sexuality of O'Brien's texts is not due to the words themselves, but because these words challenge the masculine hegemony. It is this manner of interrogating the patriarchy that O'Brien's early writing correlates with the first wave of feminism. As the first

wave of feminism tends to criticize the “de jure,” that is, the officially-imposed mandates of government, O’Brien’s concern with the de Valeran constitution in her early writing places these stories as very “first-wave” feminist texts (Connolly 63).

O’Brien’s Early Writing and the Rebuke of the de Valeran Constitution

Early in O’Brien’s *The Country Girls Trilogy*, a coming-of-age series focused predominately on the lives of Caithleen Brady and Baba Brennan, O’Brien connects Caithleen’s mother with Yeats’ Cathleen ni Houlihan. In Irish art, drama, and literature, the Cathleen (Kathleen) ni Houlihan figure is a traditional nationalistic emblem used to encourage men to fight for Irish independence. Occasionally called the Shan Van Vocht (poor old woman), the figure initially represents a victimized Ireland. However, upon receiving aid from young Irish men, the Shan Van Vocht transforms into a beautiful woman. In Yeats’s play *Caithleen ni Houlihan*, the playwright uses this traditional figure as an effective call-to-arms against the domineering British. In the play, Cathleen ni Houlihan is initially an old woman whose “four beautiful green fields” have been stolen by “strangers,” and then, with men on her side, is transformed into a beautiful queen (Harrington 7). By portraying Ireland as a wronged but potentially beautiful woman who wins the hearts of Irish men, Yeats successfully convinces Irish men to give up work and family to fight for their queen. At the end of Yeats’s play, young Michael accepts Cathleen ni Houlihan’s call-to-arms, leaving his family curious about the woman who beckoned him away:

PETER [to Patrick, laying a hand on his arm]. Did you see an old woman going
down the path?

PATRICK. I did not, but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen.

In *The Country Girls*, O'Brien includes a passage almost identical to Yeats's description of Cathleen ni Houlihan. Hickey tells Caithleen: "You know many Irish people are royalty and unaware of it. There are kings and queens walking the roads of Ireland, riding bicycles, imbibing tea, plowing the humble earth, totally unaware of their great heredity. Your mother, now, has the ways and the walk of a queen" (CGT 13). By connecting the potentially martyred Mrs. Brady to Cathleen ni Houilhan, O'Brien issues a call-to-arms for Ireland's women against the male-driven hegemony that leaves women abused and sacrificed at the hands of Irish men.

In her reference to "Cathleen ni Houlihan," O'Brien effectively rewrites Yeats's play in contemporary terms. No longer plagued by the British, O'Brien realizes that now Irish women are in a battle of their own, and urges women to break away from the patriarchy. Significantly, O'Brien goes beyond simply referring to the established Irish literary convention, but actively engages in the same tradition pioneered by the canonical Revivalists. Like Yeats, O'Brien uses codified language within her own literature to champion a message to Irish women, urging them to fight for their own independence.

While O'Brien uses the same allegorical trope Yeats used nearly forty years earlier, critics have noted that O'Brien subverts the woman-as-Ireland figure version of Cathleen ni Houlihan. In her paper "Mapping out a Landscape of Female Suffering: Edna O'Brien's Demythologizing Novels," Eileen Morgan discusses O'Brien's feminist use of the woman as representative of Ireland, arguing that O'Brien undermines the original Ireland-as-woman nationalist ideal of "Cathleen ni Houlihan" or "Shan Van Vocht." While these allegorical women still represent Ireland, O'Brien's women will no longer passively attend to their men; rather their suffering will shed light on their own repressed state. Morgan astutely notes that Eavan Boland's feminist manifesto "A Kind of Scar" (1989) is a useful "poetic project parallel to

O'Brien's fictional one" (456). Mary Burke also uncovers the similarity between Boland's manifesto and O'Brien's *Trilogy*, arguing that "As a young woman struggling with creative self-expression in 1960s Dublin, Boland was O'Brien's almost exact con-temporary" (230). In her manifesto, Boland argues that the years of representing Ireland as a woman has hindered her own ability to write, as she must break down the ingrained tradition in the minds of her audience. In O'Brien's early fiction, the novelist both engages with the Irish literary tradition by utilizing the powerful allegory, but also critiques the nationalist intentions imposed by the early use of the Ireland-as-woman figure. Burke posits that O'Brien's writing offers an "explicit refusal of this culturally mandated female passivity" that is implicitly tied to a work that uses the representation of Ireland as a woman (230). This subversion is achieved since O'Brien is willing "to explicate the real lives and sly subversions of nationalist and Catholic pieties of sexually awakening young Irish women ..." (230). While her early writing may contain the "Cathleen ni Houlihan" figure, O'Brien significantly rewrites the trope to criticize nationalist sentiments, particularly those concerning the family in the de Valera constitution.

The Confrontation with Domestic Abuse

When considering O'Brien's early feminist concerns, the passages concerning physical and emotional abuse reveal the author's basic concern with Irish women's wellbeing. The de Valera constitution explicitly places the family as the "natural primary and fundamental unit group of society" and that the government will "guarantee to protect the family in its constitution and authority." To reveal familial problems within the Irish family unit, either through literature or drama, would imply that the constitution misrepresents the reality of Irish family life. This realization would make Ireland politically vulnerable; politicians are likely to find the

representation of familial discord problematic as it will render article 41.2 of the constitution overly-glorified and embellished. In her representation of Irish country life in *The Country Girls Trilogy* and the short story *A Scandalous Woman*, O'Brien successfully deconstructs the constitution's image of the Irish family, replacing it with a more honest, stinging appraisal of Irish existence. While this frank representation of Ireland may have caused the early banning of her books, it successfully revealed the woman's difficult position in Irish domestic life.

In *The Country Girls*, the protagonists' abuse is pervasive, directly influencing their subsequent romantic relationships. Both young Caithleen and her detached mother suffer from Mr. Brady's alcohol-induced tirades. Just the thought of Mr. Brady's nightly arrival from the pub keeps his wife up all night "waiting for the sound of his feet coming through the wet grass," leaving her exhausted in the morning, quiet at breakfast with her "blue eyes small and sore" (CGT 6, 5). Sadly Caithleen shares her mother's fear of abuse, and describes her own encounter with a drunken Mr. Brady: "There was my father, drunk, his hat pushed far back on his head and his white raincoat open. His face was red and fierce and angry. I knew that he would have to strike someone ... He came over and gave me a punch under the chin so that my two rows of teeth clattered together" (27). Caithleen "knew he would have to strike someone," showing that this occurrence is only a part of a pattern of abuse that is bound to happen again.

Yet Mr. Brady's abuse is not only physical, but also emotional. During her early years at home, Caithleen observes her father's recurrent hospitalizations due to alcoholism. She indicates that it was only during her father's absence that she and her mother felt safe: "Dada was in the hospital that day recovering from one of his drinking sprees and it was one of the few times I saw Mama happy. It was only for the few weeks immediately after his drinking that she could relax, before it was time to worry again about the next bout" (10). When Hickey, the family's

farmhand, asks Caithleen “how are things,” she “told him things were well, remembering Mama’s maxim ‘Weep and you weep alone’” (11). Sadly Caithleen is not well, as the mere thought of her intolerable father nearly causes her to forget her mothers’ advice to cry only in private. Mrs. Brady’s “maxim” places both Caithleen and her mother as sufferers in a pre-feminist Ireland. Significantly, silence is a weapon of the patriarchy; at this young age, Caithleen has yet to hear the whisperings of the leaders of the women’s liberation movement who would eventually arrive in Dublin and slowly provide women with a voice. With this voice, the women of the movement will offer progress toward a gradual disarming of the masculine hegemony’s insidious ability to quiet abused women. While Caithleen’s outlook is grim, her fate is not yet sealed. By her twenties Caithleen will enter a Dublin where the work of women engaging in the “first wave” of feminism has finally revealed the domestic injustices placed on wives and mothers while offering alternatives to the most outspoken women. Yet like many women, Caithleen will eventually find the pressure of the patriarchy too demanding, and will not benefit from the early feminist change in Ireland. Even more bleak is Mrs. Brady’s future—she is both from the country and located in the rigid and traditional generation before Caithleen; consequently, she will neither hear of nor benefit from this first wave of feminism or the eventual Women’s Movement. Instead, Mrs. Brady is left to suffer from the still powerful patriarchy and its demand for silence.

Mr. Brady’s emotional abuse becomes so severe that it eventually physically manifests itself within Caithleen. During an afternoon’s momentary privacy in the Brady home, Baba and Caithleen are interrupted by Mr. Brady’s unexpected arrival. His greeting to Caithleen is terse and painful: “A nice thing to come into an empty house. Where’s your mother?” (27) He completely ignores Caithleen’s presence in the home, because without his wife, he has merely

entered “an empty house.” Mr. Brady’s lack of acknowledgement of his daughter alongside his sarcastic and callous greeting causes marked emotional pain that nearly overtakes Caithleen. When the girls leave the Brady home, Baba yells to Caithleen “Jesus, He’s Blotto, let’s run,” yet Caithleen “couldn’t run, [she] was too weak” (28). The abuse is so damaging that Caithleen becomes paralyzed by her violent and destructive father.

Similar to Caithleen, Eily, to whom the title of the short story “A Scandalous Woman” refers, is also shown to be physically abused as a child. In the beginning of the story, the narrator describes Eily’s father’s abusive behavior and the subsequent effect upon Eily: “In front of her parents she was somewhat stubborn and withdrawn, and there was a story that when she was young she always lived under the table to escape her father’s thrashings” (FH 239). The frequency of Eily’s abuse develops into a “story” within the community, where everyone realizes that Eily’s father is “an old man with an atrocious temper” whose violence keeps his young daughter perpetually hidden under the kitchen table (FH 248).

Throughout the course of *The Country Girls*, Caithleen becomes infatuated with Mr. Gentleman, “the beautiful man who lived in the white house on the hill” (CGT 12). Yet Caithleen’s rather bizarre attraction to a man significantly older than her father lies both in his name and appearance. Caithleen never believes that a man whose reputation earned him the name “Mr. Gentleman” could be physically abusive, and his “distinguished” appearance, complete with “gray hair” and “the face of an old, old man” points to an inherent physical weakness due to age (CGT 12, 157).

The sexual encounters between Mr. Gentleman and Caithleen are rather innocent; the two never have sex, and when they are intimate, Caithleen’s attraction is based on her reaffirmation of Mr. Gentleman’s age. Caithleen finds that there is “something very soft about [her] Mr.

Gentleman. Not his face. Not his nature. But a part of his soft, beseeching body” (CGT 169). Far from youthful, Mr. Gentleman’s body has become “soft” and “beseeching,” thereby incapable of inflicting physical abuse upon Caitleen.

Caithleen ultimately reveals that her attraction to Mr. Gentleman is due to his embodiment of qualities that are completely antithetical to those of Mr. Brady. Before Caithleen’s father punches her, she notes that her father approached her “with his wild and lunatic eyes staring at [her]” (CGT 27). Quite conversely, Caithleen offers a description of Mr. Gentleman’s “tired eyes” and “face carved out of pale marble” (CGT 53, 57). The conflicting descriptions of Mr. Brady and Mr. Gentleman expose the motivation behind Caithleen’s desire for romance with an elderly man: Caithleen finds comfort in the physically harmless Mr. Gentleman.

Like Caithleen, young Eily’s abuse shapes her subsequent romance. Eily is attracted to Jack, an older, though certainly not yet elderly, Protestant bank clerk whom she calls “Romeo” (FH 243). The bank clerk is no Romeo, however, and while he deceives the narrator into believing that he is “a right toff in his plusfours with his white sports bicycle,” his malevolence is quickly revealed when he and Eily are caught having sex by Eily’s father, embracing in the most “satanic position” (FH 251). The narrator confirms the suspicion that Eily has been impregnated, she notes that Eily has now “joined that small sodality of scandalous women who had conceived children without securing fathers and who were damned in body and soul” (FH 252). Jack, now realizing the consequences of his earlier pleasure, attempts to escape from his forced marriage to Eily (FH 243).

Nevertheless, Eily’s initial attraction is based upon her desire to escape from her physically abusive father, whom the narrator describes as a “very gruff man who never spoke to

the family except to order his meals and to tell the girls to mind their books” (FH 248).

“Romeo” provides Eily with both attention and the possibility for escape from the wrath of her father. The narrator describes Eily and Jack’s sexual encounters as “embraces and transactions,” with the implication that Eily hopes that one side of the “transaction” will bring her freedom from her father. Sadly Eily becomes a partial Juliet to the malevolent Romeo; the allegorical poison that Juliet drinks does not kill Eily, yet it leaves her “talking and debating to herself,” like a “wild creature” with “gray and frizzled hair,” clad in a “streelish costume” (FH 262).

The violent and disheartening transformation of Eily’s life is a direct criticism of the power of the patriarchal Irish society. Jack is just as complicit in the pregnancy as Eily; however, he is not left with hair “fall[ing] out in clumps” or talking to himself, rather he “got promoted and was running a little shop and had young girls working as his assistants” (FH 262). Ostensibly, this society allows Jack to continue his life almost exactly as he did before the pregnancy. Jack’s sexual habits are left unchanged, not only does he have a shop that he fills with “young girls,” but he even attempts to seduce the narrator, “pressing his knee against [the narrator’s knee] asking [her] which did [she] like best, sweet or savory?” (FH 262). Jack’s Protestantism is telling; if he were Catholic he would likely suffer some consequences for his action. Yet his location outside the Catholic Church allows for his escape from nearly all persecution.

The apparent happiness and levity that remains in Jack’s life is starkly contrasted to Eily’s dismal existence. The village considers Eily’s pregnancy almost exclusively her fault; she made the mistake of becoming pregnant “without securing [a] father,” implying that unexpectedly conceiving a child is both unfair to the man, and “damn[ing]” to the woman. The malevolence of Jack is obvious, and O’Brien’s critique of the patriarchy’s gender-imbalance

successfully deconstructs the myth surrounding the “sodality of scandalous women.” The conclusion of the story is typical of O’Brien’s early fiction and is very foreboding; while the ridiculousness of the patriarchy’s collusion in Eily’s downfall is apparent, she never recovers from her schizophrenic ramblings, and Jack is never punished. The dismal conclusion points to O’Brien’s call for continued effort in Ireland’s feminist cause.

De Valera and his Marital Hell

Although the passages relating to sex and abuse tend to draw significant critical attention, many of O’Brien’s early feminist concerns can be found in the less obvious, and consequently less critically examined scenes. In *The Country Girls*, Cait’s mother’s drowning is ominous; neither Caithleen nor O’Brien’s readers ever learn the exact details of her death, and the resulting narrative void is strikingly similar to the silence surrounding domestic problems in 1960s Ireland. Throughout *The Country Girls Trilogy*, O’Brien’s critique of the de Valeran constitution hinges on Mrs. Brady’s death. The importance of the drowning is illuminated by the addition of the trilogy’s 1986 epilogue, as Mrs. Brady’s death now flanks both the beginning and the end of the three stories. The events that occur between Mrs. Brady’s death in the first few pages of *The Country Girls* and the revisiting of her drowning in the epilogue all return to Mrs. Brady’s demise: Caithleen can never liberate herself from the stifling forces of her family, and is forced to carry the burden of her mother’s death throughout her life. In her article “‘Meaniacs’ and Martyrs: Sadomasochistic Desire in O’Brien’s *The Country Girls Trilogy*,” Shirley Peterson notes that the death of Mrs. Brady effectively marks the transfer of Mr. Brady’s abuse to Caithleen: “When Mr. Brady finally does return to find his wife gone, he turns his anger on Kate, physically abusing her. The discovery that Mrs. Brady has, in fact, drowned while trying

to flee this oppressive situation only guarantees her martyrdom and passes the mantle of masochism to her daughter” (155).

O’Brien’s obvious critique of the patriarchal hegemony is first delivered through Mrs. Brady. Not only does she embody the image of “Mother Ireland,” but her ultimate demise is a chilling omen of the sluggish acquisition of women’s rights in late 1950s and early 1960s Ireland. In Caitheleen’s young memory she can remember Mrs. Brady initially fighting against the oppression. When Mr. Brady discovers Jack Holland’s hand on his wife’s lap, Caitheleen recalls her father’s reaction:

[he] shouted and pulled up his sleeves, and Mama told me to go to bed. The shouting, high and fierce, came up through the ceiling because my room was directly over the kitchen. Such shouting! It was rough and crushing. Like the noise of a steamroller. Mama cried and pleaded, and her cry was hopeless and plaintive. (CGT 14)

Mrs. Brady’s initial struggle against her husband soon turns to silent ambivalence, characterized by catatonic behavior in which she sits “staring straight ahead at something only she could see, at fate and the future” (CGT 5). Her “fate and the future” must have been extremely foreboding, as Mrs. Brady’s attempted escape from her abusive marriage leads to her death. Mrs. Brady has exhausted all possible options in retaliating against her marriage; not only will both fighting back and subsequent silence yield no advantageous solution, but her ultimate death points to impossibility of escape. If Mrs. Brady’s experience is to be projected on Irish women as a whole, then O’Brien offers a rather dismal prognosis of a wife’s existence in 1960s Ireland.

It is not only Mr. Brady’s physical abuse that is transferred to Caitheleen after her mother’s death, but Caitheleen inherits a life uncannily similar to that of her mother. Living an

autonomous existence is never an option for either Caithleen or Baba; their early days in Dublin are focused on attaining a male-companion. On their first night in Dublin, Caithleen describes Baba's excitement of being in the city: "'I'm going to blow up this town,' [Baba] said, and she meant it, that first night in Dublin" (CGT 133). Baba's intention of "blow[ing] up the town" is contingent on men; she is always scanning rooms "looking around to see if there were any nice boys" (CGT 132). Caithleen's early attempt to avoid engaging in courtship is due exclusively to her imagined bond with Mr. Gentleman. She often provides Baba with half-hearted excuses in an attempt to avoid her obligatory double-dates. Frequently Caithleen's "feet were tired" or she simply "want[ed] to go home" not because she does not want to meet men, but her fantasy-relationship with Mr. Gentleman is all consuming (CGT 132). While the ending of this relationship was traumatic, the reality that she could never live a married life with Mr. Gentleman placates Caithleen, and she finds that her memory of him is merely "a shadow now," and she only thinks of Mr. Gentleman "the way one remembers a nice dress that one has grown out of" (CGT 179).

It is during the first few paragraphs of the second novel in the *Country Girls Trilogy*, initially called *Girl with Green Eyes* then later renamed *The Lonely Girl*, when Caithleen truly realizes that she is free from her self-imposed bond to Mr. Gentleman. Surprisingly, her desire to meet men almost matches Baba's ferocious romantic appetite. Baba now imagines dating men who are older; she tells Caithleen that "we'd have to meet new people, diplomats and people like that" and Caithleen responds not with an excuse, but with enthusiasm (CGT 181). Now, Caithleen finds that meeting a man is her "constant wish," and she describes her fervent desire to engage in a fairytale-like romance:

It was my constant wish. Some mornings I used to get up convinced that I would meet a new, wonderful man. I used to make my face up specially and take short breaths to prepare myself for the excitement of it. But I never met anyone except customers, or students that Baba knew. (CGT 181)

It takes Caithleen only a short time to meet her next companion, and her desire for her fairy-tale romance becomes so overpowering that she expedites the courtship and is suddenly engrossed in a full-scale relationship. Unconsciously mimicking her mother, Caithleen fails to realize that her new companion, the older and previously-married Eugene Gaillard, is very similar to her father in his predisposition toward abuse (albeit emotional, not physical) and support of the stifling patriarchy. Yet unlike her mother, Caithleen cannot look forward to see her “fate and future,” instead she mistakenly notes that “[Eugene Gaillard] wasn’t like anyone I knew,” finding his “long” and “gray” face to resemble “a saint’s face carved out of gray stone that I saw in the church every Sunday” (CGT 5, 185). The austere facial features’ resemblance to that of the church’s statues is foreboding, yet Caithleen does not recognize the Church’s implicit connection with the patriarchal hegemony that will ultimately bring about her demise.

The warning signs of emotional abuse are obvious as early as Caithleen’s first meeting with Eugene, yet her desire for romance makes her relatively oblivious in recognizing these signs. Eugene is older and more educated than Caithleen, and makes this status apparent in his conversation with her. His condescension leaves Caithleen “ashamed at knowing so little,” and she becomes so nervous that her own dialogue becomes forced and awkward. Caithleen embarrassingly asks “What’s the difference between white wine and red wine?” evoking the trite and haughty response from Eugene: “One is red and one is white” (CGT 185). When listening in on a conversation between Eugene and a journalist, Caithleen senses Eugene’s “odd

expression of contempt while he spoke,” yet passes it off, misrepresenting his “soft voice” as a better predictor of character (CGT 184, 185).

Since both Eugene and Caithleen desire different qualities in a romantic partner, their relationship is doomed from their first date. Like Mr. Gentleman, Eugene finds Caithleen’s youthful appearance and rural upbringing attractive. Caithleen, perhaps once again looking for the father-figure she never had as a child, finds Eugene’s age and education desirable. But in their early exchanges, both characters inadvertently evoke the other’s sought-after characteristics while in reality, the character’s true qualities are nearly antithetical to their façades. Caithleen, in an attempt to impress Eugene, makes herself appear less intelligent than she really is. When Eugene asks Caithleen what she reads, she responds “Chekhov and James Joyce and James Stephens and ...” the rambling response is obviously an embellishment, but its delivery leaves Eugene believing that Caithleen is entirely misrepresenting her education and that her rural upbringing left her naïve and ignorant (CGT 196). In reality, Caithleen is intelligent; she earned a scholarship to a prestigious convent school at an early age, and is an avid fan of James Joyce. Just after their arrival in Dublin, Baba asks Caithleen to “stop asking fellas if they’ve read James Joyce’s *Dubliners*[.] They’re not interested. They’re out for a night. Eat and drink all you can and leave James Joyce to blow his own trumpet,” and Caithleen quietly tells Baba that James Joyce “is dead,” and that her decision to discuss Joyce is simply because she “just like[s] him” (CGT 150). Caithleen soon meets Simon, a friend of Eugene’s, and once again proves her knowledge of Joyce. Simon tells her “Well, here you are, shining quietly behind a bushel of Wicklow bran,” and Caithleen wittily replies, “You pinched that ... from James Joyce” noting that she “remember[s] everything that she [had] read” (CGT 332).

Just like Caithleen, Eugene attempts to emphasize qualities that he believes Caithleen will find attractive. In reality, he has no desire to engage in an emotionally-involved relationship: he later admits this when he complains “I’ve lived like a hermit for so long, I mean, sometimes I feel lonely,” and he believes that Caithleen’s naivety and ignorance will provide him with mere companionship, not a highly-emotional and potentially complicated relationship (CGT 309). In an attempt to evoke the knowledgeable, mature persona he believes Caithleen desires, Eugene initially behaves like a father. Early in their relationship, Caithleen notices his subtle attempt to appear fatherly; she says that he “held my hand; he did not squeeze my fingers or plait them in his, he just held my hand very naturally, the way you’d hold a child’s hand or your mother’s” (CGT 199). Earlier on the date, Caithleen notices that Eugene “petted her wrist,” behavior that is more common between a father and daughter rather than two people in a romantic relationship (CGT 199). In reality, Eugene is in no position to be a surrogate father to Caithleen; in fact, he similarly desires a father-figure of his own. He realizes this, and later admits to Caithleen “So we both need a father ... we have a common bond” (CGT 311).

Of course, Caithleen and Eugene were never compatible, and Eugene finds himself wishing that he listened to his early instinct that told him: “I don’t want to get involved. It must be my natural, puritan caution, because Baba and [Caithleen] are two lovely girls, and I’m a man more than old enough to know better” (CGT 199). But Eugene does engage in the relationship with Caithleen, partially because he was lonely, but more significantly, because he thought Caithleen’s naïveté would allow him a shallow and merely physical relationship. Eugene surrounds himself with men who highlight his own character: Eugene’s friend Simon asks Caithleen if she has measured Eugene’s “you-know what,” noting that “All my women measure mine” and that “it’s great fun; you should try it” (CGT 332). Caithleen is disgusted, yet Eugene

does nothing; he even allows Simon to announce that Caithleen has “a nice little ass,” leaving Caithleen blushing and embarrassed (CGT 334).

Eugene’s perverse desire for a naïve and uncouth country girl is a reaction to his failed marriage with his first wife, Laura. While the reasons the marriage ended are not made explicit, it is evident that the problems were rooted in Laura’s failure to be subjugated by Eugene. Her powerful and strong-willed character is obvious in both her appearance (Caithleen describes a photo of Laura; she has “short hair and a strong face”) and her need for independence (GCT 323). When Laura became fed up with her marriage, she fled to America with the couple’s daughter, leaving Eugene with only a few photographs and an occasional letter. Yet when Laura learns of Eugene’s relationship with Caithleen, she writes a subversive and even malevolent letter; she suddenly wishes that Eugene’s life is filled with “everything nice”, and Laura signs her letter with “love and kisses” (CGT 342). While the note may be due to her jealousy, the letter still proves Laura’s new-found capacity for manipulation; no longer is she subjugated by Eugene, but she now controls the relationship.

Eugene’s hope of acquiring an idealized country girl, characterized by her naivety and simplicity, is eventually proven impossible in Caithleen. He becomes frustrated with Caithleen’s jealousy toward Laura, and Caithleen recalls Eugene’s realization that she is not the girl he truly desires:

‘It’s funny,’ he said, ‘the difference between fantasy and reality. When I met you those first few times in Dublin by accident, I thought to myself, Now there is a simple girl, gay as a bird, delighted when you pass her a second cake, busy all day and tired when she lies down at night. A simple, uncomplicated girl.’ He spoke mournfully, as if he were speaking of someone who had died. (CGT 339-340).

The realization is important in that it uncovers both what Eugene desired, and Caithleen's true character. Eugene intended to find a girl unlike Laura, one that would constantly feel "gay as a bird" and happy to behave in the role of subservient partner. His wish for a simpleminded woman, one who could be satisfied by the simple offering of a second dessert, is left unfulfilled. While Caithleen may have evoked these rather base qualities in her desire to please Eugene in their early days of courtship, her intelligence and need for emotional-support eventually emerges, surprising Eugene and causing him to lose desire for Caithleen.

While Caithleen ultimately proves that she is not a "simple, uncomplicated girl," she does not have Laura's strength to abandon Eugene. Instead, Caithleen lives a silent and painful existence in which she is forced to suffer from Eugene's domination with only muted protest. The evening Caithleen loses her virginity points to Eugene's intense misogyny; she now finds that she has "passed—inescapably—into womanhood" and that sex is "very strange ... so odd, so comic" (CGT 316). The fact that Caithleen equates sex with the "inescapable" points to her belief that womanhood and sexual intercourse are inexorably bound together. Yet she does not enjoy having sex, it is not only "strange" and "comic," but Caithleen tries to "persuade herself that she [is] not afraid" (CGT 316). In the not-so-blissful aftermath of their encounter, Eugene proudly tells Caithleen that she is "a ruined woman now," showcasing his patriarchal leanings. He continues to frighten Caithleen, telling her that he "doesn't want [Caithleen] sophisticated," he just "want[s] to give [her] nice babies" (CGT 317). Caithleen is "terrified," but barely voices her opposition; she seems to silently acknowledge her new and unavoidable role, one that is prescribed to Irish women (CGT 317).

Caithleen soon finds that maintaining a happy relationship with Eugene is nearly impossible, and she begins to search desperately for a solution to her unhappy relationship.

Because of Eugene's previous marriage, he has an easy excuse to avoid commitment to Caithleen, yet she still desires his loyalty. Caithleen attempts to calmly interrogate Eugene's lack of compassion when she tells him: "but the way you do things, you're so independent and you don't tell me anything," yet his response reveals his chauvinism. Eugene replies, "My God! ... So you want ownership, too, signed and sealed? One hour in bed shall be paid for by a life sentence?" (CGT 343). Yet Caithleen finds no solace, and while she "lost [her] nerve and could not look at him," she has no option other than replying to Eugene's callous remark in "an appeasing voice" (CGT 344).

Eugene and Caithleen's relationship serves as a model for a 1950s and 1960s Irish marriage where the wife (or wife-to-be in Caithleen's case) has no voice, and the husband's superiority is written in the constitution. Caithleen notes her difficult position as an Irish woman, particularly in that her silenced voice occludes the consideration of her own needs. She has no option other than subservience, and she expresses this after an argument with Eugene when Caithleen apologizes, yet does not "know what [she] said 'I'm sorry,' it's just that he had this marvelous faculty for being right and [she] always felt sorry, no matter whose fault it was" (CGT 344). In the aftermath of their argument, Caithleen articulates the crux of her difficult relationship with Eugene:

And even in loving him, I remembered our difficulties, the separated, different worlds that each came from; he controlled, full of bile and intolerance, knowing everyone, knowing everything—me swayed or frightened by every wind, light-headed, mad in one eye (as he said), bred in (as he said again) 'Stone Age ignorance and religious savagery.' I prayed to St. Jude, patron of hopeless cases. (CGT 345)

Caithleen articulates the sentiments of other Irish women who are “controlled” by men “full of bile and intolerance” as they have neither a voice nor the ability to escape. Eugene realizes that Caithleen is bound to him: he regretfully notes that “One hour in bed shall be paid for by a life sentence,” and when Caithleen attempts to leave Eugene, she is forced to turn to him and ask if she “can have a pound for [her] bus fare” (CGT 343). Caithleen has no independence, and Eugene’s branding of Caithleen as a “ruined woman” causes her to be fettered within the relationship.

The third novel of *The Country Girls Trilogy*, ironically titled *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, shows Caithleen appearing and behaving much like her mother years earlier. Significantly, the comparison between the women demonstrates the pattern of female subjugation inherent in 1950s and 60s domestic Irish life, and further highlights the women’s inability to escape from the male-driven hegemony. Caithleen and Eugene, in a brief respite from the nearly continuous strife of their relationship, marry and have a child. The birth of Cash is not surprising; while the relationship is tumultuous, Eugene agrees with article 41.2 of the Irish Constitution that suggests women must have children to successfully create the Irish family unit. Unfortunately, the Gaillard’s son now provides the pair with collateral that may be used during the couple’s worst fights. Like her mother, Caithleen now attempts to protect herself along with Cash, often sacrificing her own well-being for her son’s health and safety. Caithleen eventually leaves Eugene, taking Cash with her, yet Eugene still proves to have immense power over Caithleen. Baba describes Caithleen’s desperate phone call with Eugene as she apologizes for her actions:

The upshot is, her on the telephone to him, bursting over with apology and saying she shouldn’t have done it. I thought after all that trouble I’d gone to, to get that room. She was so goddamn servile I could have killed her. Telling him that he

should have met a good woman, but that there was no such thing. Letting the sex down with a bang. The happy conclusion reached was that she'd bring Cash home and take the room herself, to brood over her faults for a few weeks. (CGT 421)

Arguably, Caithleen engaged in an affair that partially justifies Eugene's discontent; however, the affair itself was necessary for Caithleen's emotional survival, as it fulfilled her need for companionship denied by her husband. However, Caithleen's rebellion is only a slight protest against her subjugation. In her response to Eugene on the telephone, Caithleen shows her engagement in the role as Irish mother; Baba complains that Caithleen is "so goddamn servile," and that she betrays women by saying that "there was no such thing" as a "good woman." Caithleen's behavior is similar to that of her mother; her tenuous position as an abused Irish mother leaves her vacillating between abandoning and serving her husband, with the State's protection only guaranteed if she chooses the latter.

Caithleen is forced to turn Cash over to her husband, and in doing so continues the cycle she was involuntarily thrust into when she was a child. While sending Cash back to Eugene, Baba and Caithleen comment on this parallel to their own childhood. They tell Cash that "his mother had to go to the hospital," lying in their desire to protect him (CGT 421). Caithleen painfully turns to Baba and says "Poor Cash, he doesn't know what's ahead of him" and Baba, in a rare show of emotion, begins to cry (CGT 421). Finally, Baba considers the girls' childhood alongside Cash's future:

Parents, I thought, the whole ridiculous mess beginning all over again. Hers and mine and all the blame we heaped on them, and we no better ourselves. Parents not fit to be kids. Talk of tears, we bawled and bawled, and the driver had to go

around the square twice before she was ready to go into her new lodgings. I couldn't go with her, it was too hurtful. (CGT 421)

Baba realizes their inability to behave as proper parents, yet the dysfunction is connected to their marriage and location as a woman within Irish society. Like her own mother, Caithleen continues the damaging cycle, and in keeping with the pattern, she dies in a drowning during her final desperate moments as a homeless and childless mother. The juxtaposition of the martyred Brigit Brady and now similarly deceased Caithleen Brady allows O'Brien's articulate bemoaning of the patriarchy to come to the fore of the *Country Girls Trilogy*. The suggestion that the damaging effects of the masculine hegemony are inherited from mother to daughter is frightening in itself. Yet O'Brien's *Trilogy* enhances the fear with the author's refusal to offer women the potential for escape from the subjugation.

Even the strong-willed Baba cannot escape the hegemonic Ireland of *The Country Girls Trilogy*, and in *Girls in Their Married Bliss* Baba gets married to a man she calls "rich and a slob," partially because she feels "sort of sorry for him" (CGT 384). While Baba's relationship is not nearly as stifling as Caithleen's marriage, Baba's romance is not based on happiness or love; rather she is interested in the rich lifestyle offered by Frank. Baba recalls that her first fear upon marriage was having intercourse with Frank, noting that "I liked his money and his slob ways: I didn't mind holding hands at the pictures, but I had no urge to get into bed with him" (CGT 385). Baba's mother colludes with the patriarchy, telling her daughter to "just grit [her] teeth and suffer it," and Baba tentatively recounts this exchange with her mother, adding that she did not want to "sound all martyrish about it" (CGT 386).

Martha Brennan enjoys her daughter's husband; his money allows her to visit Baba in London, and she experiences "the life of Riley" (CGT 386). Baba uses Frank's money to have

“her [mother’s] corns attended to, new clothes, gin slings every evening in hotels” (CGT 386).

Yet Baba knows she could not have achieved this lifestyle on her own; success and happiness are connected with family and marriage, and because of this realization Baba calls herself “the bloody sacrificial lamb” (CGT 386). Without her husband, Baba knows she would not enjoy the privileged lifestyle; she willingly “sacrifices” herself to the institution of marriage in order to enjoy prosperity.

It only takes the first few lines of O’Brien’s next novel, *August is a Wicked Month* (1965), for the author’s continued concern with women’s forced and constricted lives to once again come to the fore. The novel’s narration is in the third person, and the events of the story center upon Ellen, a mother in her thirties, who is unhappy in her marriage. As the novel opens, readers learn that Ellen’s son and her estranged husband are preparing to leave for Wales on a camping trip, leaving Ellen with the opportunity to travel on her own. She hesitantly prepares her holiday travel plans; her recent marital strife leaves her worried and emotionally unstable, and Ellen is uncertain whether she will enjoy what she believes will be a brief interlude from her responsibilities as wife and mother. The omniscient narrator introduces Ellen by name and begins to convey her emotional state. Ellen’s role as a sacrificial mother is presented early; she is initially compared to a stone that retains the heat of a summer day during the evening. This stone is described as “provident” since it gives “back the warmth taken throughout the hot day and she saw it as something human – the mother who reserves love for when it is most needed” (AWM 7). At the conclusion of Ellen’s description, the familiar tone is interrupted; while Ellen is introduced by name, the narrator suddenly describes a man simply called “The child’s father” (AWM 7). Readers only later learn the man was once Ellen’s husband, and the dramatic introduction signifies the man as doubly estranged: he is literally distanced by the text since his

name is withheld, and the man is figuratively estranged in his tenuous separation from Ellen.

The vague description of “The child’s father” is ominous; by neglecting to foster the same sense of familiarity as with Ellen, the narrator imbues the reader’s mistrust of the husband.

The ominous tone and the reader’s mistrust are soon validated, and O’Brien’s famous binary of a repressed woman working against a male tyrant is once again revealed. Ellen is jealous and unsure of her relationship. During one of her husband’s visits, she notices his jacket hanging on a nail and decides to go “through the pockets for clues, reverting to wifedom again” (AWM 8). The use of “reverting” in the description of Ellen’s sudden engagement in her old marital habits points to a looming end to the relationship; now, her role as a wife is located only in the past. Similarly, the marital breakdown is traceable in Ellen’s husband’s disengagement from his old habits: the narrator notes that he “despised petty honour, but no longer thought it was his duty to correct this or any other flaw in her” (AWM 8). The description reveals both the end of the relationship and the husband’s malevolence. The husband’s recognition of the end of the relationship is obvious in that he “no longer” felt obligated to make note of Ellen’s “petty honour.” More tyrannical is his belief that as a husband, he finds it a “duty to correct this or any other flaw” in Ellen.

The relationship between Ellen and her husband is uncannily similar to Eugene and Cait’s marriage; both relationships first endure a tumultuous spell characterized by fighting, yelling, and substantial emotional abuse. Yet following this initial violently vocal stage is a regression into an apathetic silence, an eerie marital void that invariably inflicts more harm upon the woman while conversely offering a sense of victory for the man. The narrator describes this two-tiered relationship breakdown:

They'd got over the worst part; the acrimony when she first left and when he posted broken combs, half-used compacts and old powder puffs in his campaign to clear out her remains. They'd got over that and settled down to a sort of sullen peace, but they talked now as she always feared they might, like strangers who had never talked at all.

The focus on Ellen's reception of her husband's "campaign" against her is telling; she is the loser in the symbolic war, enduring the onslaught of her husband's figurative ammunition in his hasty ejection of her belongings. The quiet aftermath is particularly difficult for Ellen, as her marriage has dwindled into a depressing bond between two people who can now only behave "like strangers who had never talked at all."

The ruined marriage has also affected the couple's child, Mark. The young boy is traumatized by his parent's fighting, and his pain is subsequently translated to Ellen. She suffers alongside her son, and in her own grief, Ellen finds that her husband has once again attained a victory. Mark's difficulty with the decay of his parent's marriage is noticeable in his creation of an imaginary friend, George. The narrator connects the imaginary friend with the marital breakdown: "They'd separated two years before and the child was shared between their two homes. Out of necessity he invented George" (AWM 9). George tends to emerge during the couple's particularly volatile moments during which Mark occupies himself with his imaginary friend. George serves as a solitary steady influence in Mark's life, as the narrator comments that Mark "kept conversing with [George] ... through the years" (AWM 8).

Ellen's guilt over the disintegration of the marriage alongside Mark's negative reaction to the couple's separation continues to cause her pain. Mark would "love her to join them" on the camping trip, and Ellen is certain that Mark will "hug her and say 'Good old Mama,'" if she

decides to go along with the father and son (AWM 9, 10). But Ellen knows that she must not accompany them on the excursion as she realizes that she could not “bear the thought of night and her husband appointing their sleeping positions” (AWM 10). The mere consideration of sleeping alongside her husband causes too much pain, since “For the last year of their marriage he avoided her in bed and she did ever want to relive that” (AWM 10). The narrator’s emphasis on the husband’s “avoid[ance]” of sex with Ellen not only implies that the husband has the power to control the relationship, but that he finds Ellen to be largely responsible for the marital breakdown.

Ellen begins to believe her husband’s unstated claim that their marital strife is substantially due to her “flaws” (AWM 8). During a meal with Denise, a new friend she meets during her holiday, Denise asks Ellen “You got a guy then, or what?” leaving her surprised at the question, realizing that “It was no longer possible to give simple answers to a simple question” (AWM 106, 107). Yet Ellen connects her failed marriage with Ireland and its landscape, claiming that her Irish heritage has partially contributed to the marital breakdown. Ellen responds to Denise with a synopsis of her life through an elongated series of fragmented answers:

Irish, cottage, poor, typical, pink cheeks, came to be a nurse in London, loved by all the patients, loved being loved, ran from operating theatre because one of those patients who had cancer, was just opened and closed again, met a man who liked the nursemaid in me, married him in a registry office, threw away the faith, one son soon after. Over the years the love turned into something else and we broke up. Exit the nice girl. (AWM 107)

The response in itself is significant: the fact that Ellen finds herself “typical” promotes the notion that Irish marriage is inherently doomed. In Denise’s “vehement” response to the story, she empathetically notes that “It’s marriage” that is the root of Ellen’s problems (AWM 107). Yet Ellen, a true sufferer of the de Valeran constitution, masochistically places the fault on women, claiming that “It’s not marriage, it’s us” (AWM 107).

The brutality of Ellen’s husband is most apparent when he informs his wife that their son had been killed during the camping trip. On his way to fetch milk, the young Mark is struck by a car as he crosses the street. Ellen is informed of the tragedy on the telephone, her husband merely saying: “Mark. He got killed” (AWM 120). The news is delivered with neither compassion nor sympathy; instead, Ellen’s husband is “furious” that he was unable to easily ascertain the location of Ellen during her holiday. Ellen soon learns that her husband even buried Mark without her presence. Ellen’s husband rigidly delivers the details of their son’s death; he simply says that “everything was mutilated,” and that “he never saw him” (AWM 121). Ostensibly, if either parent has any responsibility for the accident, it could only be the husband: he was camping with Mark, and accountable for ensuring the safety of the seven-year-old. Yet Ellen’s husband once again reflects the blame upon his wife. When Ellen says that she will return home, she receives the terse reply, “Don’t come. I couldn’t see you,” and her husband quickly ends the conversation (AWM 121). Ellen is left alone in another country, and thinks:

It is always thought that in times of crisis people go wild, but she was not wild.

She was calm and able to say to herself that she had killed her son. The logic was simple: if she’d never left her husband they would have holidayed together and she and the child would have gone for the milk and they would have stood, hands

held, waiting for the car to go by and it would be something that flashed by leaving a cloud behind and they would have then crossed the road. (AWM 122)

The grieving mother is used to incurring blame: she “was not wild” as she began to take responsibility for her child’s death alongside her failed marriage, both of which she believes are her fault. Ellen is certain that her attempt to exit the marriage directly contributes to her son’s fatality.

The rather somber events of the novel only become darker as the story closes. Ellen returns to her old family home, and a neighbor stinging informs Ellen that her husband has moved out, taking a woman with him: “He’d carried out some things – a book, a clock and a record player – one day and put them in the care and driven off. There was a girl with him” (AWM 160). The husband’s new twenty-something girlfriend even looks like Ellen; the neighbor describes the girlfriend’s hair styled “down her back” and Ellen’s feelings of jealousy and guilt momentarily resurge (AWM 160). Yet the guilt quickly fades, and Ellen believes that she suddenly experiences a catharsis. She cries “tears of relief” upon her realization that “out of [her husband’s] pillaged life he had the strength to start afresh, to lay his head on some pure green breast where the milk might be wholesome. She was thankful to him in some strange way” (AWM 160). Ellen’s rationalization of her husband’s new life is far from “freeing”; instead, Ellen’s belief in the patriarchy keeps her in the familiar and submissive role as wife. She finds “relief” not in her own life, but in her husband’s happiness: she enjoys the idea that her husband can find a new Irish girl who is “wholesome.”

Ironically, Ellen’s husband enjoys a new romance with a young, healthy girl; Ellen’s brief relationship with the elderly Sydney is the opposite of “wholesome.” The skeletal man does not offer the promise of happiness in a relationship; instead, he leaves Ellen battling a series

of venereal diseases. O'Brien's commentary is both obvious and stinging: not only is marital strife often blamed on the wife, but a failed marriage offers promise for a man, and decrepitude and emotional death for a woman. The story closes in autumn as Ellen walks home from her visit to the doctor, clutching "violet lotion" for her venereal disease noticing the changing leaves on the birch trees. She claims that she is "not happy, not unhappy," but Ellen's even mood is overshadowed by the fall evening in its representation of death (AWM 168). While Ellen believes that the day is "a cool and lovely autumn," what she really observes is the dying leaves, "she watched them drop off, curl down and lodge in a bed of grass, still heavy with moisture, they were falling all around her, simple and unceremonious; for a month or two at least ..." (AWM 169). The scene is foreboding; if anything, the falling leaves should not be "lovely" to Ellen, they instead illuminate her own looming demise. Earlier in the text, Ellen notes that her marriage led to the "throwing away" of her "faith," and the decaying leaves are reminiscent of the leaves that would likely be found in a post-fall Eden as they are "curl[ed]" and "heavy," presumably weighed down by "sin" (AWM 107). The notion that the leaves are "falling all around" Ellen may represent the many "fallen" women; ostensibly, the physical landscape is tied to the women and the pervasive problem of the masculine hegemony.

The falling leaves in O'Brien's conclusion of *August is a Wicked Month* parallels the snow falling at the end of Joyce's "The Dead." While both stories' endings are foreboding, O'Brien's conclusion is arguably worse in that Ellen never attains the realization that her feeling of contentment is a façade built by her collusion with the patriarchy. While Ellen will spend the rest of her life unaware that her acceptance of gender roles ultimately causes her demise, Gabriel of "The Dead" realizes his own flaw. The snow falls around Gabriel as he understands that he will never achieve the love that his wife experienced with her childhood beau, Michael Furey.

Gretta tells her husband that Michael died for her, and as the story finally closes, Gabriel understands that he will never realize such romantic passion.

Ellen, Cait, Baba, Eily and Mrs. Brady all belong to a generation of O'Brien protagonists who are silently suffering in their unyielding prescribed role as wife and mother. These women are certainly part of the Ireland described by the narrator in the final scene of *A Scandalous Woman*: "It was beginning to spot with rain, and what with that and the holy water and the red rowan tree bright and instinct with life, I thought that ours indeed was a land of shame, a land of murder, and a land of strange, throttled, sacrificial women" (FH 265). These poignant final words that conclude *A Scandalous Woman* could easily end many of O'Brien's early texts. This particular passage contends that the "throttled" Irish women are truly "sacrificial" in that they give up happiness in succumbing to the difficult role as wife and mother. Often abused, these women's voices are silent, and O'Brien's depiction of life within their marriages allows the novelist to successfully critique the repressive de Valeran constitution.

CHAPTER III

From Kate O'Brien to Edna O'Brien: Lesbianism and Second Wave Feminism

Second Wave Feminism and the Irish Women's Liberation Movement

The second wave of the Irish feminism (1970s and early 1980s) offered women a significantly superior political representation in Ireland. While the first wave of Irish feminism focused primarily on the officially-mandated subjugation of women (*de facto*), the second-wave of feminism interrogated both the officially-mandated and the unofficial inequalities (*de jure*) placed on Irish women. Prior to the late 1960s, women found that there was no proper forum in which they could voice their feminist concerns. With a government still implicitly promoting the masculine hegemony, their calls for equity were often ignored. Margaret O'Callaghan argues that besides "the important set of middle-class organizations that protested strongly against the position of women in de Valera's 1937 constitution, there were few proto-feminist organizations" (FD 129). Instead, women "involved themselves publicly as housewives or community activists, or in the sodalities and voluntary groups of the Catholic Church," thereby fulfilling their own goals in community activism (129). It was this atmosphere that finally provoked a few very vocal women to encourage other Irish women to join them in promoting change.

Irish feminists finally experienced sudden public recognition with the formation of an Ad Hoc Committee on women's issues in 1968. The shift is significant; no longer were women forced to protest in a private and hushed forum, they were now offered a public arena in which they could voice their concerns. June Levine notes that the change began in the end of 1967 after a chain of events; the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women requested that

the International Alliance of Women's Groups ask their own subsidiary women's groups to urge their governments to create a committee on the status of women. This request brought together the Irish Housewives' Association and the Business and Professional Women's Clubs of Ireland, and these groups agreed to rally the support of smaller Irish women's groups. The rather mixed group of women met on the 30th of January in 1968 and agreed to quite simply "concentrate on researching the need for a national commission on the status of women" (Levine 177).

While it took over a year for the Irish government to respond to their request for the creation of a commission on the status of women, the Ad Hoc Committee eventually achieved its goal. In November of 1969, Taoiseach Jack Lynch announced the formation of the commission. In his published response to the Ad Hoc Committee's request, Lynch encouraged the newly-appointed committee to expedite a published report structured around his clearly-articulated mission statement:

To examine and report on the status of women in Irish society, to make recommendations on the steps necessary to ensure the participation of women on equal terms and conditions with men in the political, social, cultural and economic life of the country, and to indicated the implications generally – including the estimated cost – of such recommendations. (178)

The *Report on the Status of Women* was published in 1972, with a "moderate tone that made it widely acceptable" (Levine 178). Forty nine recommendations were outlined in the *Report on the Status of Women*, with seventeen focused on remedying unequal pay and poor working conditions for Irish women. June Levine highlights the committee's wide-range of goals: "It outlined the need for training facilities and opportunities for women, an end to sex discrimination in employment and for the provision of twelve weeks' maternity leave" (178). Additionally, the

committee recommended change to the social welfare system, taxation, and the educational system, as each of these areas tended to benefit men with little regard for the needs of women. The committee focused on promoting the rights of women with little political representation, particularly those living in rural Irish areas as well as female Travellers.

Among the committee's many valid concerns, their most pressing issue focused on women's inability to engage in their own family planning. While in retrospect the committee's comments on family planning tend to appear as a mere precursor to the issue of contraception and abortion that characterized the Irish Women's Movement in following years, the committee's act of highlighting the contraception issue was unprecedented in Ireland. The government's denial of women's right to family planning was a significant and largely undocumented problem in Ireland during the 1960s. Women were unable to obtain information on family planning; literature concerned with anything from contraception to abortion was strictly banned, and informative pamphlets about these issues surfacing in Dublin during the 1960s were effectively collected and disposed of.

Margaret O'Callaghan argues that the lack of information regarding family planning was most detrimental to rural or poor women. Because most women were not only unaware of family planning but often encouraged to produce large families, Irish women often found their futures grim, as they were forced to live in accord with a prescribed Irish lifestyle. O'Callaghan notes that "To a degree higher than in most European countries biology really was destiny for Irish women of all but the highest social class" and that "poorer women and Traveller women" actually "fell completely outside the net of society's protection" (FD 109). Irish women had an "average family size [that was] high" and their marriages were often late or difficult to attain (129). The *Report on the Status of Women's* concern with the issue of family planning was a

fitting turning point in the Irish Feminist Movement, significantly marking the beginning of the second stage of Irish feminism.

While the formation of the *Report on the Status of Women* and its suggested changes for Irish women marks the beginning of the second wave of Irish feminism, the Irish Women's Liberation Movement (IWLM) exemplifies the middle and latter portions of this second wave. Historically, this Irish movement occurred later than Women's Movements in other countries (the United States saw its Women's Movement begin in 1966)⁶, but the women of the IWLM were able to look toward the United States to help determine how "those [American women's] rights and opportunities could be defined for Irish women" (Levine 179). The members of the IWLM met haphazardly in 1969, but the group's inception was marked on the 13th of October 1970 when the women held their first meeting at Gaj's Restaurant.⁷ June Levine notes that these meetings were held according to feminist ideology in that the women "did not imitate male power systems but struggled to remain leaderless and maintain structurelessness, so that there were no officials and anyone who was willing got a turn at doing everything" (180). When the women found it increasingly difficult to operate outside of a hierarchy, they divided their group into subsections based on the women's separate concerns; some members were concerned with "the experiences of being female," while others were "more interested in discussing the social problems relative to women's issues" (Levine 180).

The Irish Women's Liberation Movement became public in 1971 when the founding women appeared on the popular Irish television program *The Late Late Show*. Viewers were introduced to the movement's manifesto *Irish Women – Chains or Change?* which "looked for equal pay, equal access to education, equality before the law, the availability of contraception, justice for deserted wives, [and protection for] unmarried mothers and widows" (O'Connor 75).

The women noted the success of the moderately-toned *Report on the Status of Women*, and Levine recalls their intention to follow this model in their presentation of *Irish Women – Chains or Change* during their appearance on *The Late Late Show*. Yet the women's intention for a moderate evening was never realized; in retrospect, the near-riotous turn-of-events appears comic, yet in 1971 the women's outrage was necessary, and presented itself as a rather somber indication of the still-prevalent patriarchal mindset. Levine recalls the provocation of the sudden outbursts during the course of the program: "The moderate tone of the show was maintained for a time as each panel member presented her arguments. It was when the audience joined in that the debate became heated and the whole strategy of the IWLM fell apart" (180). Levine herself shouted "You don't have to be black in Ireland, you only have to be a woman," and Mary Kenny yelled "I don't think [the men in Dáil Éireann] give a damn" (181).

The women's vehemence exposed during the evening of the *Late Late Show* continued on the 19th of March when the women attacked the Catholic Church's stance on contraception. The women attended the beginning of a mass in Dublin, but walked out during the reading of the archbishop's letter "condemning" all aspects of contraception (Levine 181). The Catholic Church's attitude toward contraception exemplifies only a part of the church's collusion with the Irish patriarchy; most notably, the church served as one of the most vocal proponents of female subjugation by placing women as inferior to men in their urging of women to maintain a de Valeran life within the home.

The IWLM's early focus on reproductive rights allowed the group to become the sudden voice of the contraception debate. While the work of individuals prior to the women's walk-out of the church sermon is rarely investigated, there are some brief reports of other groups actively criticizing the contraception issue prior to the inception of the IWLM. Michael Viney

highlighted the issue of family-planning when in his series of pieces published in the Irish Times in 1966. Entitled “Too Many Children,” Viney “outlined the problems experienced by large families,” and as a result of his criticism, “a small group of doctors and lay people began meeting to discuss the problem” (Connolly 95). Yet Mary Maher recalls that it was the women of the IWLM who became the voice of the debate by way of attracting publicity through their rather untraditional method of criticizing the contraception ban. The public’s reaction to the women’s engagement in the “contraceptive train,” which smuggled contraceptives from Northern Ireland into Dublin with the intention of embarrassing customs officials, was executed just as the women planned. Maher recalls: “The IWLM used the word contraception out loud” and that “with determined flamboyance confronted the sham of legal prohibition which punished only the poor and uninformed by declaring the illegal devices purchased in Belfast to Dublin Customs officials” (Mary Maher, *Irish Times*, 31 October 1980). Fennell and Arnold report that the women achieved their goal to humiliate the customs officials: “The gleeful women blew up condoms like balloons and customs officers found it embarrassing to be confronted by women demanding to be arrested” (qtd. in Connolly 120).

The IWLM was short-lived as the group disbanded by the mid-1970s. The group’s disintegration was due in part to their realization that they achieved their main goal; the *Report on the Status of Women* was now published and available, and the women publicized the need for further work towards attaining women’s rights. Yet the Movement colored Ireland’s second wave of feminism by threading together both the *de facto* and *de jure*, providing women with a more comprehensive criticism of the patriarchal Irish society. In a speech made by June Levine during her time in the Movement, she articulates this amalgamation of the public and private grievances:

‘Equal rights for Irish women – do you think it’s just that for every 26p a woman earns a male counterpart gets 47; do you think it’s just that the civil service and state sponsored bodies ... sack women upon marriage; do you think it’s just that the tax structure actively works against women’ its more, ‘I remember in particular a woman called Helen Weavy stood up and said ‘I’m an unmarried mother’ and we had to wait for the appluse to die down...it was just so brave of her to do what she did at that time. (Connolly 119-120).

Not only did the IWLM combat the issue of unequal wages and the civil service bar, but they attacked the prejudices placed upon women like Helen Weavy, where a happy life as an unmarried mother in Ireland was nearly impossible to attain. The influence of the short-lived yet very powerful IWLM on Irish women’s rights was major: after disbanding, the former members of the movement were credited for starting subsequent women’s groups including The Fertility Guidance Clinic, The Women’s Progressive Association, and various Rape Crisis Centres within Ireland (O’Connor 76).

The major accomplishments of the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement are widespread, and many of the Movement’s goals can be traced within contemporary Irish literature. In *The Transformation of Ireland*, Diarmaid Ferritter notes “perhaps what the women’s liberation movement achieved was to make private life public life, and to focus attention on the social, economic, and political structures that defined life” (723). It is the Movement’s initiation of a change from “private life” to “public life” that makes its accomplishments particularly relevant to an analysis of the characters in Edna O’Brien’s writing. Feminist critics have often argued that Ireland’s literature forces the female voice to the periphery of the page, as these women are stifled by the overpowering patriarchal messages found in Irish writing. Yet contemporary Irish

literature has experienced a change where “women use their voice on the margins” to successfully overpower the traditional masculine voice within the text (Ingman 524).⁸ By explicitly critiquing women’s silenced voice (either through the legal framework or societal prejudice), Edna O’Brien’s writing, like the IWLM, suddenly exposes the Irish women’s experience.

O’Brien’s writing, either intentionally or inadvertently, accurately parallels the feminist trajectory. As discussed, her early writing correlates with the first-wave of feminism in its criticism of female subjugation via political policy (mainly the de Valera constitution). Yet by the second wave of feminism, O’Brien criticizes subjugation both in oppression invoked by public policy and the implicitly incited oppression by society (mainly prejudice). With this, O’Brien adopts feminist strategies that, in retrospect, may not have benefited the movement at large. Linda Connolly argues that feminist authors working during the second-wave of feminism often “just continue with the important task of theorizing and revealing women’s lives separately, on their own terms” simply because “their work is persistently overlooked or insufficiently considered in the mainstream” due to the writers’ feminist focus (23).

O’Brien’s writing in the 1970s and ’80s, then, serves as a prime example of texts that are criticized for their repetitive themes merely because the author’s feminist concerns can only be voiced within a prescribed model. Given this difficulty, it is not surprising that even through the 1980s O’Brien’s texts still focus primarily on a female protagonist while following a generic narrative structure. Lynette Carpenter’s analysis of O’Brien’s critical reception in the 1980s highlights the circular dilemma evinced by these critics during O’Brien’s second-wave writing: Carpenter notes that “[O’Brien] has been criticized for writing the same story over and over, and for not writing the story she writes best” (263). Yet writing outside of this prescribed mold

would occlude the public's consideration of her texts—at least during the 1980s—and would undermine her authorial goals. Nevertheless, O'Brien's mere repetition of a particular narrative structure does not mean that she writes the same story over and over, regardless of whether this repetition was accidental or in response to the still male-dominated literary world described by Linda Connolly. Significantly, O'Brien's writing of the 1970s and 80s offers a provocative challenge to both the public and private male patriarchy, despite the critical concern with the texts' repetition. A prime example of O'Brien's dual-engagement with public and private (*de facto* and *de jure*) problems during her writing in the era of second-wave feminism is through her engagement with lesbianism. Serving as both a public and private issue, homosexuality was publicly illegal in Ireland until 1993, while it was a rarely discussed issue even in the privacy of most Irish households.⁹ When homosexuality was discussed within the privacy of the home, the conversations were often riddled with prejudice. As a result, homosexuals in Ireland found it difficult to come out during the 1970s, 80s and early 90s for fear of the inevitable prejudiced whisperings that would occur behind closed doors. During her time in Ireland, Rosemary Mahoney met with Orla O'Shaughnessy and discussed the prejudices surrounding lesbianism. Orla bemoans the fact that "lesbians are invisible in Ireland. In Ireland they just term you a spinster or left-on-the-shelf, or they say, 'Ah, sure, she always liked her book'" (245). Mary, a friend of Orla's adds to her comment about the invisibility of Irish lesbians alongside the marginalized, but more visible Irish gay man: "and they wonder how two women can have sex. They just can't work that one out" (246). These attitudes pervaded Irish culture during the decades of the second wave of Irish feminism, and unlike the rather positive changes women experienced to date, the homosexual in Ireland (and globally) is still eagerly waiting meaningful social change.

Lesbianism and 1970s and 80s Ireland

Ironically, any discussion of the history of Irish lesbianism is predicated upon the initial interrogation of male homosexuality on the island. A study of Irish lesbianism has little context without this preliminary analysis since nineteenth- and twentieth-century Irish legal rhetoric dealt exclusively with the homosexual Irish male, effectively occluding the lesbian woman in legal discourse. This in itself is telling; even within marginalized Irish groups, men still take precedence. However, the male-oriented emphasis within homosexual legal rhetoric was a precedence gay men likely despaired: Ireland and England's Victorian sodomy laws made male homosexuality illegal, with section 61 of the *Offences Against the Person Act* (1861) stating that "whosoever shall be convicted of the crime of buggery, committed either with mankind or with any animal, shall be liable to be kept in penal servitude for life" (qtd. in Casey 32). When government officials realized that men could essentially by-pass the law by engaging in other homosexual acts, officials added the *La Bouchere Amendment* (1885), criminalizing "any act of gross indecency with another male person" (Casey 33). However, a constitutional reference to lesbianism was nonexistent even after the adoption of this second act against homosexuals. It was not until 1921 that the British government seriously considered the absence of lesbianism within the amendment, and they began the process of rewriting the clause to also ban female homosexuality. However, before a clause was put into effect, government officials abandoned their efforts since they felt that merely referring to lesbianism might provoke women to engage in same-sex acts. Terry Castle notes that

When members of the House of Lords decided in 1921, for example, not to amend the antihomosexual Criminal Law Amendment Act to include acts of "gross indecency" between women, it was not because they deemed the threat of

lesbianism an inconsequential one – quite the contrary – but because they were afraid that by the very act of mentioning it, they might spread such unspeakable “filthiness” even further. (6)

This anti-homosexual attitude prevailed throughout the 20th century, leaving gay men engaging in any type of sex act vulnerable to criminal prosecution. At the same time, the government’s active marginalization of lesbians revealed the country’s intention to hide the notion that any type of female homosexuality might even exist in Ireland.

It was not until 1993 that Ireland finally decriminalized homosexuality. This significant achievement was primarily due to the work of Irish social activist David Norris. While the Irish Gay Rights Movement began in 1974, the movement’s first turning point occurred in 1984 when Norris brought the movement’s goals into the courtroom in an attempt to decriminalize homosexuality in *Norris vs. Attorney General* (1984, I.R., 36, 70). As part of the case, Norris was obliged to undergo psychological analysis in order for the judge to determine his competency to engage in such a trial. In the article “The Lost Language of the Irishgaymale,” John R. Quinn notes the psychiatrist’s findings after a series of evaluations:

A stage was reached when the plaintiff, because of what he was referring as a result of his homosexuality, was referred to one of Dublin’s leading consultant psychiatrists. After nine months of psychotherapy the psychiatrist advised the plaintiff that, in the interests of his mental and psychological health, he should consider emigrating to a country [other than Ireland] ... where the law takes a more liberal attitude to male homosexuals. (555).

Of course Norris disregarded the advice, and instead continued his effort to decriminalize homosexuality. Frustrated with his continued failure in the Irish courts, Norris brought the case

before The European Court of Human Rights in 1988, and his goals would finally be realized. After the trial, the European Court of Human Rights “found the Irish sodomy laws violative of the Convention’s express guarantee of personal privacy” and the court’s findings were important since “Five years later the Irish Parliament repealed Ireland’s sodomy laws virtually without debate” (Quinn 558-559).

The psychiatrist’s advice to David Norris during his initial trial in 1984 exemplifies both the public and private attitude toward homosexuality in Ireland prior to its decriminalization in 1993. The country simply did not want to consider homosexuality as a potentially valid lifestyle for its Irish citizens, instead urging its ‘afflicted’ members to emigrate elsewhere. The situation for Irish authors who wrote about homosexuality or lesbianism during this time was even more dismal. Quinn notes that

On the homosexuality side of the privacy coin, literary inquiry intensifies the contrast between American and Irish configurations of privacy. Despite his emancipation from the criminal law, the Irish homosexual is relatively muted in literature and culture, whereas in the United States, gay literature is widely read and in many areas gay culture flourishes. (560)

Application of Quinn’s assessment to the Irish lesbian’s representation in literature is even more revealing. If the Irish homosexual man is “muted,” then the Irish lesbian’s voice is nonexistent. Because Irish lesbians’ sexual lives were never considered overtly criminal, they received far less public attention than the gay Irish male, leaving these women on the periphery of Irish literature. Quinn’s comparison between American and Irish gay literature is astute; he highlights the considerable lack of contemporary gay Irish literature and significantly greater lack of gay literature prior to the 1990s.

The expression of lesbianism in Edna O'Brien's writing follows a distinct trajectory; her texts engage with homosexuality more completely as time progresses, and her writing tends to confront the ever-changing Irish attitude toward lesbianism during the particular period each text is published. The close engagement with homosexuality alongside the societal reaction to its expression allows O'Brien's lesbian-oriented writing to serve as unique primary sources in analysis of the cultural atmosphere during the given period. It is important to realize, however, that Edna O'Brien's general focus throughout her career is most notably the heterosexual woman, and when considering to the scope of O'Brien's work, the exploration of the lesbian is minor in comparison to other O'Brien protagonists. Further, O'Brien often expresses lesbianism as reactionary; or significantly, women's defense against their male-imposed subjugation. As such, the "lesbian" women in O'Brien's texts are in a tenuous position on the sexual-orientation spectrum since they are shown to *choose* to become romantically involved with women. In terms of O'Brien's novels, the author uses women of varying sexual orientation to signal either collusion or disagreement with a society's heteronormative leanings. As such, O'Brien's stories with an Irish lesbian character certainly enhance and color the writing, while allowing the O'Brien critic to successfully pinpoint O'Brien's feminist voice.

Before engaging in a discussion of Edna O'Brien's lesbian writing, it is useful to consider Kate O'Brien's role in developing the much underrepresented Irish lesbian literary canon. Not only do both Kate O'Brien and Edna O'Brien similarly criticize the patriarchal Irish society, but both authors attempt to push their readers to consider lesbian relationships as both valid and healthy. As an Irish author writing during the first-wave of feminism, Kate O'Brien's work has been posited as an early lesbian voice within contemporary Irish literature. An examination of this early influence is important when considering Edna O'Brien, as Kate O'Brien's inspiration

can be traced within Edna O'Brien's writing. Further, Edna O'Brien effectively takes Kate O'Brien's lead after the publication of her final novel in 1958, coincidentally close to Edna O'Brien's first novel (published in 1960). Even after forty-seven years of writing, Edna O'Brien continues to work toward achieving the same goals Kate O'Brien began working for nearly eighty years ago.

A cursory glance at Kate O'Brien's critical reception will reveal uncanny similarities with Edna O'Brien's own critical treatment, perhaps serving as a partial explanation for Edna O'Brien's similarity to Kate O'Brien. In the introduction to *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien*, Eibhear Walshe notes that: "There is, undoubtedly, a distance and an uncertainty in public perception of [Kate] O'Brien as an Irish writer. She falls into no ready category, judged as appearing to vacillate between popular fiction and 'literature', Catholic conscience and Wildean dissidence, English letters and Irish writing, bourgeois history and feminist fable" (1). The critics' desire to place Kate O'Brien outside of an Irish literary canon is much like critics' attempts to do the same with Edna O'Brien. Like Edna O'Brien, Kate O'Brien experienced a critical lull in scholarship dealing with her writing. Walshe posits this lull in the fact that Kate O'Brien was "Marginalised, along with Joyce, Beckett and other mainstream Irish writers, and then, like them, rehabilitated and reprinted after years of critical (not popular) neglect, her work failed to find any comfortable place within this mainstream" (1). Both O'Briens left Ireland yet continued to write about it, and in her biography of Kate O'Brien, Lorna Reynolds notes that "[Kate] O'Brien's 'exile' was in fact voluntary and freely made and not part of some Joycean aesthetic," further highlighting the similarities between the two authors (qtd. in Walshe 6).

Reading Kate O'Brien as a lesbian author is increasingly difficult due to the pervasive censorship of biographical information relating to her non-heterosexual romantic life. Notably, it is Kate O'Brien's family that has withheld or misrepresented information regarding the author's sexual life—an ironic fact, given that censorship of Kate O'Brien's books plagued her career—and critics can only speculate about Kate O'Brien's personal life alongside the issues confronted in the author's writing. Emma Donoghue notes that Kate O'Brien's family's withholding of information allows for their effective rewriting of Kate O'Brien's life in a heterosexual context. Their censorship of biographical information encourages this rewriting not in the typical method of “bowdlerization, avoidance of the obvious, and *cherchez l'homme*” but instead through “simply avoid[ing] the lesbian issues in her work” (37). Following Emma Donoghue's lead, many critics find that the only way to examine Kate O'Brien's lesbianism is by “leaving aside the difficult task of wresting biographical information from censored or reluctant sources” and turning to the texts themselves (37).

Kate O'Brien's first novel *Without my Cloak* (1931) offers a clear exploration of homosexual attraction between men. While the love between the two men is not made explicit, the description of Eddy points to his homosexuality: he is delicate, has an ambiguously defined lifestyle, and, in the stifling 1930s Catholic Ireland, no longer attends mass. Eddy enjoys traveling abroad with Richard, and the reader wonders if it is with Richard that Eddy is having the affair referred to in the novel. Kate O'Brien's exploration of male homosexuality is not surprising, as Emma Donoghue argues that

A common strategy of the closet is to write about homosexuality of the opposite gender; many gay men and lesbians have found it safer to write about each other than themselves. Kate O'Brien not only uses this device, presenting clearly

homosexual characters in *Without my Cloak* and *The Land of Spices*, but brings in other unlawful passions such as incestuous devotion in *Without my Cloak* and *The Last Summer*, and (in most of her novels) heterosexual passion which could lead to adultery. (38)

Donoghue's analysis now allows for the placement of *Without my Cloak* into the trajectory of lesbian texts that follow this introductory novel. No longer do critics have to avoid discussion of this text (as does Adele Dalsimer in *Kate O'Brien: a critical study*) when attempting to categorize Kate O'Brien's lesbian novels; instead, a lesbian writer's expression of homosexual love between men is no longer problematic in the realization that such opposite homosexual representations often appear in the writing of closeted lesbian writers. Edna O'Brien, on the otherhand, clearly represents lesbian (and not male homosexual) desire within her writing; without assuming Edna O'Brien's own sexuality, perhaps she is more empowered by way of the accomplishments of the women in the Irish feminist movement.

An analysis of Kate O'Brien's novel *The Land of Spices* (1941) is useful when considering Edna O'Brien's lesbian writing, particularly since her short story "Sister Imelda" is likely based on Kate O'Brien's *The Land of Spices*. Kate O'Brien's novel was notorious; the book was banned not for its lesbian content, but for a brief passage concerning the depiction of male homosexuality. The scandalizing passage is both quick and vague, merely stating: "she saw Etienne and her father, in the embrace of love" (LOS 157). Yet this was enough to incite the Irish Censorship Board, horrified at the "immorality" of such a statement (Breen 169). In her article "Something Understood? Kate O'Brien and *The Land of Spices*," Mary Breen notes that the Irish Censorship Board "'understood' that this novel, which deals with convent life in Ireland in the early years of the twentieth century, was 'so repulsive' that it 'should not be left where it

would fall into the hands of very young people’” (Breen 168). If Kate O’Brien was once again attempting to keep herself safely in the closet by discussing men’s homosexuality, she failed in her endeavor, as the passage led to critical speculation about her own sexuality.

Similar to Edna O’Brien’s criticism of Eamonn de Valera’s conception of family in *The Country Girls Trilogy*, *The Land of Spices* also offers extremely potent commentary, with the fiercest sections attacking the newly-formed de Valera constitution. The most obvious derision of the constitution is articulated through the text’s representation of a romantic relationship between people of the same sex. Yet when considering the text, one notices that protagonist Helen Archer does not condone her father’s homosexual relationship; in fact, she finds herself disgusted by it, announcing: “So that was the sort of thing that the most graceful life could hide! That was what lay around, under love, under beauty. That was the flesh they preached about, the extremity of what the sin of the flesh might be” (LOS 159). Not surprisingly, the Irish Censorship Board did not find solace in Helen’s adverse reaction to the discovery of her father’s homosexuality (it is unlikely that the Irish Censorship Board picked up on the sarcasm surrounding Helen’s reaction, which would have made the book all the more illicit). Instead, the mere reference to homosexuality was enough to induce a banning.

Mary Breen proposes that *The Land of Spices* attacks the 1937 de Valera constitution even more pervasively than through the mere representation of homosexuality. She posits that

The irony is, however, that at a more profound level *The Land of Spices* was indeed a subtle threat to the narrow isolationist and xenophobic politics that ruled Ireland in the 1940s. But it was not explicitly a threat to what the Irish Censorship Board protectively considered was a vulnerable Irish morality. Far

more seriously, it questions and criticizes the whole ideology of that period in Irish cultural history. (168-169)

Breen goes on to argue that Kate O'Brien actually criticizes numerous sections of the de Valera constitution, particularly in the text's "detachment from Irish nationalism, its emphasis on individual freedom and responsibility, its championing of religious and educational structures, detached from parochial concerns, its foregrounding of the viability of female identity outside patriarchal family units, and its determinedly outward-looking, European perspective" (169). While Breen's analysis may be far-reaching, her illumination of Kate O'Brien's powerful and intricately delivered message is accurate. Kate O'Brien's clever subversion within her texts allows for this careful criticism, further devaluing the critics who argue that she "vacillate[s] between popular fiction and 'literature'" (Walshe 1).

The Land of Spices focuses on the lives of two women, Helen Archer (alternatively the Reverend Mother, depending on the textual location) and Anna Murphy. The fateful scene during which Helen discovers her father's sexuality is a flashback, and she is currently serving as Reverend Mother in a convent. Before discovering her father's homosexual tendencies, Helen notes how highly she values the close relationship with Henry Archer, particularly enjoying "the privilege of intimacy with someone whom she found pleasing and satisfactory far beyond what was necessary in a father, or in any fellow creature" (LOS 141). The rather blissful relationship disintegrates after Helen's realization of her father's sexual orientation, and it was because of this knowledge that she joins the convent. Mary Breen argues that Henry Archer not only pushes his daughter toward her religious life, but that he lives the rest of his existence in ignorance of his role in Helen's decision to depart: "Mother Marie-Helene never tells her father that he is the reason for her sudden decision to enter the religious life: she denies him this knowledge and

chooses to see it as a kind of protection from him. But she is puzzled by his failure in perception, although she herself is the author of it” (174-175). Unfortunately unable to realize his role in the failed relationship with his daughter, “Henry Archer dies as he lived, contented and totally unaware of the exacting price his wife and daughter had to pay for him” (Breen 175).

Henry Archer’s “contented and totally unaware” death points to his implicit endorsement of the Irish patriarchy in that he forces his daughter to silently sacrifice her own life in order to preserve his secret. Later, Helen realizes that her mother similarly sacrificed when the narrator notes: “She saw now, had seen long since with bitter sympathy, that her mother’s death seemed natural, and she herself seemed very old to a child, because she did not wish to live” (LOS 138). Both women age rapidly in their unhappiness, living in solitude as a result of their role in preserving the image of the masculine hegemony. It is no surprise, then, that Helen decides to live a life in the Saint Famille Convent, a community existing only of women, with the hope that she will find happiness outside the patriarchy. Ironically, the Bishop of the diocese is officially in charge of the convent, yet Reverend Mother suppresses the threat of patriarchal infringement on the convent, and, as Mary Breen argues, successfully preserves the powerful “matriarchy” of Saint Famille (178).

The beginning of Reverend Mother’s new life in the convent is relatively void of any intense emotional relationships. She spends years existing without the bond that she once enjoyed with her father, yet reads his letters with little nostalgia. When Anna Murphy arrives at the convent, the Reverend Mother finally attains the love she had been waiting for. She carefully watches Anna grow, and is thrilled when Anna finally asks for the Reverend Mother’s guidance and support. When Anna’s high marks earn her a scholarship, the Reverend Mother is delighted, yet is forced to fight with Anna’s austere grandmother who, in support of the patriarchy, attempts

to deny Anna further education. Yet the Reverend Mother's fervent support of Anna elicits some suspicion of the pair's relationship. The suspicions are very vague; those around the pair do not know what to make of the obviously strong bond between the two women. Of everyone in the convent, Mother Mary Andrew is the one who "was convinced now that Reverend Mother had private reason to believe that Anna Murphy intended eventually to become a nun. For there was no other reason why she should fight so tenaciously for something which after all was *not* of great importance to *Saint Famille*." (LOS 264). The readers are left with similar vague suspicions. Clearly the Reverend Mother and Anna are closer than the average teacher-pupil pair at Saint Famille; not only is such a close relationship uncharacteristic of convent life, but the Reverend Mother is frequently touching Anna, often patting her or holding her hand. Yet, like Kate O'Brien's other writing, the lack of a realized lesbian relationship may either point to the women's heterosexuality, or more likely to the impossibility of executing such a relationship in the Ireland of the early twentieth century. On the surface, Kate O'Brien's decision to show the Reverend Mother as unable to consummate her lesbian desire alongside her disgust with her father's homosexuality is problematic. However, Kate O'Brien (likely) writes from experience; the pressure of a Catholic and very patriarchal Ireland kept her own lesbianism partially unrealized due her forced location in the closet.

The disheartening conclusion within *The Land of Spices* (as well as many of Kate O'Brien's novels) may be better explained by Bonnie Zimmerman in her article "Exiting from Patriarchy: The Lesbian Novel of Development." Zimmerman contends that the overwhelming difference between lesbian texts written prior to the feminist movement and those published during and after the second wave of feminism can be found in the stories' endings. The pre-feminist lesbian narratives "offer a variety of destructive or compromised alternatives for the

heroine,” in which the lesbian character either lives a lonely and romantically unfulfilled life or she escapes through suicide or by simply going mad (254). Lesbian texts written during and after the second-wave of Irish feminism offer increasingly optimistic conclusions. Now, lesbian characters are occasionally allowed to enjoy relationships with other women. Unfortunately, Kate O’Brien’s writing stopped before writers enjoyed the benefits of the second-wave of feminism, and the treatment of her protagonists tends to reveal an Ireland far from accommodating to its lesbian women. Similar to the fate of pre-feminist rebellious heterosexual women (notably Madame Bovary and Anna Karenina), Kate O’Brien’s women live in a world in which general acceptance of lesbians has not yet been realized. As such, Zimmerman’s argument allows critics to read the relationship between the Reverend Mother and Anna as an unfulfilled lesbian relationship; the ending does not prove that one of the two women is heterosexual, rather it points to the fact that in the social atmosphere of the early 1920s, Ireland cannot accommodate such a relationship.

Zimmerman’s analysis of lesbian novel-development allows for a smooth transition from Kate O’Brien’s novels to Edna O’Brien’s writing. Edna O’Brien’s allusions to lesbianism increase over time, with her first brief lesbian scene published during the first-wave of feminism, and the remaining scenes occurring in texts published during the second-wave of feminism. As noted, it is no surprise that the significant lesbian scenes are found in O’Brien’s second-wave texts, as feminist authors writing in this period tend to engage with both public and private issues. The issue of lesbianism, then, fits the second-wave perfectly as it encompasses both the *de facto* and the *de jure*. Ostensibly, O’Brien’s use of lesbian desire is another way the author voices her anger with the masculine hegemony. The lesbian references develop with time; *The Country Girls* describes only one brief sexual moment between Caithleen and Baba, yet *The*

High Road (1988) engages significantly with lesbianism, the short stories “The Mouth of the Cave” (1968) and “Sister Imelda” (1984) are centered upon unfulfilled lesbian desire. Strangely, critics chose not to deride O’Brien for the lesbian scenes in these texts, and even the stinging reviews of O’Brien’s 1960s writing completely ignores the *Country Girls* lesbian reference. Yet unless early O’Brien scholars completely missed the subtle reference, it is unlikely that the critical silence surrounding the lesbian scenes in O’Brien’s text is a sign of reviewers’ acceptance of these passages. Like the government officials who were afraid to introduce a clause in the constitution banning lesbianism, perhaps critics similarly fear that that denigrating O’Brien’s potential lesbian scenes will shed light on what they believe is unacceptable behavior.

In addition to the absence of lesbian references in O’Brien’s book reviews, scholarship offering lesbian readings of O’Brien’s texts is relatively rare. Helen Thompson urges O’Brien scholars to no longer “... relegate lesbian readings to margins and parentheses, allowing them to remain only as ghostly traces in the body of O’Brien criticism” and instead begin to explore these readings with consideration of O’Brien’s motives for their inclusion in her texts (22). Ironically, Thompson is the only author to have published a paper focused exclusively on reading *The High Road* and *Sister Imelda* in a lesbian context (*The Country Girls* and *The Mouth of the Cave* have yet to receive a comprehensive analysis of lesbianism), and it is important for scholars to consider her encouragement of continued lesbian readings. Thompson further argues that critics who merely “accept that [O’Brien] allows for sexual fluidity in her characters” or discuss lesbian readings only informally are engaging “in a dangerous practice because while the readings are available perhaps at conferences or during conversations with colleagues, and possibilities of readings exist in footnotes and asides, we have no formal record of this scholarship, which will discourage scholars from adding to a body of criticism” (22). This

comment is important in two ways; first, it serves as obvious encouragement of continued research of O'Brien's lesbian work, and second, it highlights the fact that there is little research for scholars to use to substantiate their own readings. This paper's lesbian readings of *The Country Girls* and *The Mouth of the Cave*, and the revisited lesbian analysis of *The High Road* and *Sister Imelda* serve as a response to Thompson's plea by offering a new lesbian reading in the consideration of the texts not only alongside lesbian discourse, but also in light Irish feminist discourse.

The lesbian encounters within O'Brien texts are strategically placed to surprise the reader, demonstrate the legitimacy of the romance, and to significantly criticize the patriarchal restrictions placed upon women. Much like the male-female sexual encounters within O'Brien's earlier writing, the lesbian scenes show two people who are sexually interested in each other, yet carry with them the burden of public scrutiny and disapproval. These texts' treatment of the male characters highlights their location in O'Brien's second-wave feminist writing; the men all seem tyrannical in character, and have yet to receive the equal footing that contemporary feminism will eventually provide them. As such, the violent or unappealing men in these texts often serve as an incentive for the heroines to engage in alternative relationships. As discussed, the heroine's ability to choose their sexuality complicates the discussion of the lesbianism. While I argue that reading the characters' bisexuality still allows for O'Brien to successfully convey her second-wave feminist critique of the patriarchy, it also highlights the 1970s and '80s popular conception of sexuality.

Same-sex desire in *The Country Girls* functions slightly differently than the traditional lesbian-narrative. This difference is probably due, in part, to the story's position on the cusp of the first- and second-wave feminist writing. The same-sex desire appears far more innocent in

that same-sex contact is explored between two young girls. During the early portion of *The Country Girls*, Caithleen notes that she and Baba “shared secrets,” and their “greatest secret” was when they “took off [their] knickers ... and tickled one another” (CGT 8). While the girls’ encounter may simply serve as a marker of Baba’s authority over Caithleen (she continually threatens to expose their secret until Caithleen gives “her a silk hankie or a new tartan ribbon or something”) it may also point to a burgeoning lesbian sexuality that is ultimately repressed (CGT 8). Shirley Peterson argues that “Their occluded desire leaves a lingering sense, however, that the compulsory heterosexuality to which they both succumb is performative at best” (163-164). In Peterson’s view, Caithleen and Baba’s heterosexuality is the result of their submission to the overpowering and repressive patriarchal authority.

Throughout *The Country Girls Trilogy*, Baba and Caithleen repeatedly sacrifice their own happiness to partake in a heteronormative existence. Neither Caithleen nor Baba ultimately marries for love; the crux of Baba’s relationship is wealth, Caithleen’s marriage is based on the early appearance of romance. Yet throughout the *Trilogy*, the protagonists are forced to continually sacrifice their own wellbeing to simply take part in the roles mandated by conservative Irish society. If Shirley Peterson’s claim is correct, then the women give the ultimate sacrifice in denying their own lesbian identity so that they may engage in their compulsory heterosexual relationships. The relationship between Baba and Caithleen has notoriously plagued critics over the years. Perhaps the critical confusion is due to the intricate nature of the protagonists’ potentially unrealized lesbianism, leaving scholars unsure how to characterize the pair. In a reading in October of 2006, an audience member offered a problematic reading of Caithleen and Baba, suggesting that the two women are essentially doubles, embodying the “angel and devil on the shoulder” binary. Yet in a parallel to Oscar

Wilde's character Dorian Grey, O'Brien disagreed with the statement; instead, she noted that Caithleen may represent O'Brien herself, and Baba represents the person O'Brien wishes she could be. Neither the critic nor O'Brien suggests that Caithleen and Baba are lesbians, yet this reading offers a rather feasible explanation for the women's difficult and unfulfilled existence¹⁰. Of course, Zimmerman would argue that *The Country Girls* status as an early feminist novel suggests that it would be impossible for the women's relationship to ever be realized, whether they engage in compulsory heterosexuality or not.

Unfilled lesbian desire is shown to be especially painful in the short story *The Mouth of the Cave*. The root of the narrator's desire is largely based in her refutation of Ireland's masculine hegemony. In the story, men are often "offensive after a few drinks," and are concerned not with women, but rather "how misrepresented [their] countrymen [are]" (FH 176). On her way to the village, the narrator spots a young woman in a partially secluded field. The mysterious woman is in the slowly getting dressed, and the narrator becomes infatuated with her. The narrator finds the scene enticing and shocking, especially because "nothing lurked there, no man, no animal," instead she is surprised to find the potential for privacy and intimacy between two women (FH 173). Yet fear impedes her desire, and the narrator realizes that this fear is rooted in the patriarchy. The narrator asks herself "Why am I running, why am I trembling, why am I afraid? Because she is a woman and so am I. Because, because? I did not know" (FH 174). The narrator realizes that her initial fear was contingent upon her acceptance of the societal norm, in which anything other than male-female relationships is inherently unnatural. But upon questioning this assumption, the narrator is unable to determine its rationale. Because society's rules are so impressed upon the village, fear overpowers the narrator's desire, and she

“always finds [herself] taking the sea road, even though [she] most desperately desires to go the other way” (FH 176).

While *The Mouth of the Cave* was published only eight years after *The Country Girls*, O’Brien’s new lesbian character is now placed within a well-established lesbian narrative, in accord with Bonnie Zimmerman’s formula:

At first isolated and inchoate, the lesbian discovers herself and shapes a definition of what it means to be a lesbian. As she moves through the patriarchal terrain, she spies a possibility incarnate in another woman who may become her lover. Alone or together, these women journey on to find their place in a new homeland, Lesbian Nation. They initially realize this new community as a utopian site of peace and harmony, but soon learn that they must confront the differences of personal identity and political persuasion that exist among them. The ensuing struggle reshapes and to some extent fragments the community, so that the hero journeys into herself to heal her wounds and, in some cases, creates an identity that is no longer monolithically lesbian. As she pauses in her journey, the lesbian hero, and the literature and community she represents, stands at a crossroads. (32).

In the short four pages of *The Mouth of the Cave*, the narrator experiences nearly all of Zimmerman’s stages of heroic development. The narrator quickly realizes her lesbian desire, and her commentary suggests that this discovery is due both to her glimpse of the dressing woman as well as her frustration with the unyielding “patriarchal terrain.” The narrator immediately explores the ‘anti-patriarchal terrain,’ most noteworthy in its wild, unkempt qualities: “On the surface the cliff appears to be gray. Here and there on its gray and red face

there are small clumps of trees. Parched in summer, tormented by winds in winter, they nevertheless survive, getting no larger or no smaller” (FH 173). Thompson suggests that “undomesticated landscape” is symbolic of a lesbian world due to its lack of a highly-structured and domesticated landscape imposed by the patriarchy (34). While the undomesticated landscape is a potential refuge from the Irish masculine hierarchy, it is also one where life struggles to maintain itself. Trees are neither able to grow nor shrink, and the land is “tormented.” Yet the landscape is more than simply undomesticated; it also represents femininity and lesbian desire. The cave is likely a symbol of the womb, while the mountains and hilly terrain represent the female body. The narrator notes that for her, the road to this landscape is “the rougher one.” Not only is the landscape rough in its rocky appearance, but it is also figuratively rough; unfortunately, the narrator will encounter many difficulties in an attempt to traverse a life overshadowed by a conservative and prejudiced Irish society. As a result, it is no surprise that the narrator is unable to enter “the mouth of the cave,” which would effectively allow the consummation of her desire.

Following Zimmerman’s lesbian heroic-model, the heroine must attempt to navigate through societal prejudice and disapproval to finally arrive at her own “Lesbian Nation.” In *The Mouth of the Cave*, the narrator travels alone, and is unable to ever find this “Nation.” The narrator begins the story with a statement: “There were two routes to the village,” effectively representing Zimmerman’s “crossroads” at which the narrator must choose to follow either a homosexual or heterosexual life (FH 173). As noted, the narrator reluctantly chooses the heterosexual path by the end of the story: “Yet I always find myself taking the sea road, even though I most desperately desire to go the other way” (FH 176).

In *The High Road* both Anna and Catalina have dated men prior to realizing their mutual attraction to women. Yet both women find that their men have failed them: Anna's ex had "[thrown her] off like an old garment," and Catalina's tried "to get rid of her," no longer admitting to "the sweetness or to the shiver of what passed between them" (21, 163). Once apart from men, Catalina and Anna find solace in each other as they believe they live in a world where men are no longer viable companions. Catalina takes Anna to her secret ruin in the countryside, and calls it "home," thereby "[designating] the place as [their] cave" (172). The women find themselves an appropriate pair, capable of living the life of domesticity without men, and ultimately consummate their relationship in the lush grass outside their makeshift home. However, the women still highlight their latent heterosexuality when they write men into their domestic fantasy: they tell each other that they are not merely by themselves, rather their men are "knights [who] rode off to war" leaving the couple only temporarily alone (172). The reference to men is important to O'Brien's message in that the women engage in sexual and emotional relationships not because they are exclusively attracted to women, but because their men have proven to be rigidly incapable companions. Helen Thompson argues that for Anna, "lesbian sexuality offers the emotional nurturing of which a heterosexual relationship is devoid" and that engaging in a lesbian relationship is "a way of maintaining emotional health"¹¹ (22).

The men in Catalina's village deliver one final injury to the couple: not only are the women denied compassionate male companionship, but their relationship is suddenly terminated when they are discovered by vandals who spray paint "lesbos, lesbos, lesbos" over the walls of the town (193). In response, Catalina's father "had beaten her savagely," and she is ultimately killed by the estranged father of her child (192). The bloody end to the women's relationship

marks the significant intolerance promoted by a hegemonic structure that only tolerates male-female relationships.

Like “The Mouth of the Cave,” the short story “Sister Imelda” offers another glimpse of unconsummated lesbian desire. The short story traces two young girls’ experience in a convent, where Sister Imelda, their new teacher, piques the girls’ curiosity. Sister Imelda has recently returned from Dublin where she attended college to learn foreign language, and is now the teacher of the narrator and her friend, Baba. The girls immediately notice something different about their teacher, citing her eyes as “blue-black and full of verve” and her lips as “very purple, as if she had put puce pencil on them” (FH 124). The strangeness of Sister Imelda elicits “excitement and curiosity” in the narrator, and she notes that she “had no idea how terribly [Sister Imelda] would infiltrate her life” (FH 124, 126). Like O’Brien’s other protagonists, Sister Imelda has likely realized that a relationship with a man is impossible, and instead entered a world that admits only women. The young girls sense Sister Imelda’s disregard for men, and imagine the days preceding her life as a nun were filled with “scenes of agony in some Dublin hostel, while a boy, or even a man[’s] ... advances, like those of a storm, would intermittently rise and overwhelm her ...” (FH 126).

Sister Imelda and the narrator establish a discreet relationship that is initially based upon their frequent exchange of small gifts. The narrator soon realizes her sexual desire for Sister Imelda, admiring “how supple she was and how thoroughbred” (FH 129). Of course, the couple’s existence in the convent prohibits the consummation of their relationship, and the narrator realizes “that there is something sad and faintly distasteful about love’s ending, particularly love that has never been fully realized” (FH 143). Thompson argues that the failure of love between the narrator and Sister Imelda is still due to society’s masculine values in that

“The anonymous (heterosexual male) gaze exists both inside and outside the convent” (36). This “male gaze” doubly affects Sister Imelda: she is unable to openly love the narrator, and she fails in her attempt to escape from men by joining a convent that, while attended only by women, is ultimately overseen by men.

Terry Castle’s work on lesbian narratives offers insight into O’Brien’s choice of setting. Because of the potential for women to live in a world outside of the patriarchy, Castle argues that the frames of “schooling and adolescence” and the world of “divorce, widowhood, and separation” are often utilized by authors in construction of their lesbian narratives (85). O’Brien’s decision to use a convent as the location for her story helps further emphasize her message. By offering readers an exclusively-female world, the intruding male-gaze is all the more pervasive. Castle’s analysis reveals the dual-nature of O’Brien’s criticism: not only do men run the female convent, but the association with the church leaves a lesbian relationship in violation of the rules of the church.

On the surface, the conclusion of *Sister Imelda* initially appears tragic; not only has the narrator left the convent, but when she spots Sister Imelda on a bus years later, the narrator neglects to confront the woman she once loved. Both the narrator’s avoidance of Sister Imelda alongside the women’s inability to consummate their desire may appear problematic in light of Zimmerman’s qualification of second-wave lesbian texts. Yet Helen Thompson suggests the conclusion is not completely pessimistic since Sister Imelda and the narrator spiritually consummate their relationship. The narrator imagines “I made up my mind that I would be a nun and that though we might never be free to express our feelings, we would be under the same roof in the same cloister, in mental and spiritual conjunction of our lives” (FH 136-7). In the narrator’s imagination, she and Sister Imelda will be conjoined together, perhaps enjoying a

spiritual consummation. Thompson notes that “In the place of physical climax ... the narrator imagines a spiritual and vocational merging” (35). If this is possible, at least in the narrator’s imagination, the relationship has been consummated and the conclusion is potentially optimistic.

Close consideration of the narrator’s commentary further supports this alternative, optimistic ending of *Sister Imelda*. After leaving the convent, the narrator notes that “life was geared to work and to meeting men, and yet one knew that mating could only lead to one’s being a mother and hawking obstreperous children out to the seaside on Sunday” (FH 142). Thompson suggests that the narrator

talks explicitly of the grim realities of women’s involvement in heterosexual relationships to make it clear that she does not find heterosexual attachments attractive. Indeed, the shifting of her pronouns to the formal ‘one’ suggests the differentiation between what behavior her culture dictates for her and her own reservations about that behavior (40).

Thompson highlights the subtle, yet very important argument pointing to the narrator’s ultimate refusal of a heteronormative existence. While the narrator and Sister Imelda are unlikely to engage in a romantic relationship, the conclusion suggests that the narrator has effectively realized her lesbianism. In her unwillingness to collude with the patriarchy, the narrator may very well begin a relationship with another woman in her near future.

While Thompson’s contention may allow *Sister Imelda* to fulfill Zimmerman’s qualification of feminist texts within the second-wave of feminism, reading *Sister Imelda* in light of Kate O’Brien’s *The Land of Spices* may offer even further clarification. The parallels between the two texts are many, and it seems likely that Edna O’Brien based her text heavily on the notorious novel written by the Kate O’Brien nearly forty years before. Of course, the convent-

setting of both texts is the same, and the “male-gaze” pervades the convent of both stories, pointing to the authors’ comparable critique of the ever-pervasive patriarchy. Yet the similar mentor-student relationship is the most telling parallel. In *Sister Imelda*, the nun slips a picture of “a mother looking down on the infant child” into the young narrator’s prayer book (FH 128). The gift is significant in its connection to *The Land of Spices*. While the reader may mistakenly believe the picture depicts Mary looking down on the baby Jesus, the narrator’s description of the card is of “a mother” instead of “the mother,” suggesting that the illustration is not actually depicting Mary and Jesus, but perhaps a mother and daughter. In a world where affection is aligned with gift-giving, this present is most significant; Sister Imelda has proposed to take her relationship one step further than Reverend Mother ever offered to Anna. The picture’s depiction of the loving pair suggests that the two women, despite the separation in age or status of nun and pupil, are still able to risk this subtle expression of attachment. This scene further marks the transition from Kate O’Brien’s novel to Edna O’Brien’s story in its expression of hope. By the end of *The Land of Spices*, not only is the attraction between the Reverend Mother and Anna difficult to trace, but a relationship between the pair looks to be nearly impossible. Yet the conclusion of *Sister Imelda* suggests not only the intense physical attraction between the women, but also the possibility that lesbian desire may eventually be realized by the narrator, if not Sister Imelda. Significantly, these subtle changes to a nearly identical story outline the difference between the O’Brien’s writing: Unlike the work of Kate O’Brien, Edna’s writing has effectively transitioned into second-wave feminist writing.

While Edna O’Brien’s writing may offer an increasingly powerful voice for Irish women, retrospective consideration of her “lesbian” texts highlights some of the stereotypes still plaguing Ireland during the period of the texts’ publication. It is likely that O’Brien unintentionally

simplifies sexual orientation in her desire to (rightfully) criticize a once very masochistic Irish society. In a 1996 interview with Sandra Pearce, O'Brien contends that *The High Road* was a "mistake" but that "everyone is allowed one mistake" (5). O'Brien is not forthcoming with a complete rationale behind her dissatisfaction with this text, but perhaps this reconsideration is partially due to her binary representation of sexuality. Nevertheless, O'Brien's relatively unexplored early lesbian writing offers a powerful voice for the slowly developing gay and lesbian Irish literature. By merely proving the authenticity of the lesbian couples' relationships, O'Brien successfully criticized a conservative and prejudiced society while offering an early and powerful voice for her oppressed women.

CHAPTER IV

‘It’s All in the Family’: O’Brien, Contemporary Feminism, and the Masculine Reply

Third Wave of Feminism and the Celtic Tiger

The third wave of feminism (mid 1980s to present) in Ireland offered a slightly different focus than the earlier movements. Feminists during the first two waves of feminism worked toward attaining a voice for Irish women by highlighting the problems of a constitution that considers women only in a domestic sphere. By the beginning of the third wave of feminism, Irish women’s problems were known, yet little had been done about remedying these issues. Aligning themselves closely with politics, the women of the third wave of feminism in Ireland worked to change Irish laws that repressed women.

The decade between 1980 and 1990 offered a paradoxical trajectory of women’s achievements. While an unprecedented number of women’s issues were suddenly addressed (yet left unresolved), women remained outside of the political world. Frances Gardiner and Mary O’Dowd highlight this paradox in their essay “The Women’s Movement and Women Politicians in the Republic of Ireland, 1980-2000”: “In 1980 few could have imagined that, in the space of a decade, Irish women could rock the political system, breaking the mould of Irish politics in fundamental and far-reaching ways, yet remain marginal figures in parliamentary decision-making” (*FD* 229). Echoing Gardiner and O’Dowd, Frances Fitzgerald, a 1993 TD representing the Fine Gael Party, stated that the “challenge of the 70s and 80s has been achieved and women have taught well – the lines have been learned off pat by the men in grey suits! The practice – now that is a different matter” (qtd. in *FD* 257). Irish political parties only selected eleven women as candidates in 1969, and in 1977 the number reached only twenty (*FD* 230). Yet

despite the lack of political representation, the 1980s saw success in the discussion and consideration of women's issues. Until the 1980s women's reproductive rights were never seriously discussed, but this decade offered a very vocal (and contentious) political debate. The 1980s concern with women's reproductive rights focused primarily on "the balancing of the right to life of the foetus with the right to life of the mother, and women's right to travel and information on abortion ... The legality of rape within marriage, [and] of rape law itself" (*FD* 231-232). Irish citizens were asked to vote on a referendum concerning these issues in 1983, prompting an editorial in the *Irish Times* that called the ensuing political division "the second portioning of Ireland" (qtd. in *FD* 232). The referendum passed, allowing abortion only in "the event of there being a real and substantial risk to the life, as distinct from the health, of the mother ..." (O'Connor 92). Of course, the debate over the legality of abortion for women whose lives are not threatened was not to be resolved in the 1980s, and is still causing controversy in the country to date.

Mirroring the 1983 referendum on abortion, Irish citizens were once again called to the polls in 1986 to vote on the legality of divorce. Article 41.3.2 of the constitution strictly prohibited divorce: "No law shall be enacted providing for the grant of a dissolution of marriage." While 63 per cent of voters made it to the polls, the amendment was defeated 63.5 per cent to 36.5 per cent (*FD* 233). Notably, 64 percent of women opposed the referendum, while only 46 percent of men voted against legalizing divorce, prompting Alice Glenn of Fine Gael to note that "Women voting for divorce is like turkeys voting for Christmas" since divorced women would lose all economic security (qtd. in *FD* 233).

The 1980s saw the reemergence of the Council for the Status of Women, ready to combat the Irish government's report to the United Nations that argued "Ireland had a strong

tradition of women as accepted and valued participants in political life” (qtd. in *FD* 233). With the help of over eighty women’s groups, the Council for the Status of Women planned to create its own report that would counter the government’s assertion. The beginning of the 1990s saw a major victory for Irish women, as Mary Robinson was elected president, and days later Taoiseach Charles Haughey established the Second Commission on the Status of Women. The *Report of the Second Commission on the Status of Women* (1993) attacks the issue of women’s representation in the Irish political arena. The preface to the *Report* in the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* notes that the document “was strongly critical of the absence of women in political positions of influence. The report recommends the introduction of a quota system for political parties to recruit more women and quoted both European and British examples as models” (*FD* 254). The introduction notes that the *Report* also “suggested that the electoral system for the Senate could be used to ensure a 50 per cent representation of women. Eleven of the sixty seats in the Senate elected in 1997 were held by women” (*FD* 254). If anything, the election of the first woman (and feminist) president in Ireland points to the beginning of a change in women’s representation in Irish politics. If this tradition continues, then the *Report’s* hope for 50 per cent representation in the Senate may eventually be realized.

In 1995, a second referendum was proposed to amend the constitution to allow divorce. All political parties as well as the Church of Ireland publicly supported the referendum, yet it only barely passed with a majority of 50.3 per cent. B. Girvin suggests that the reason for such a small majority can “be loosely identified with the Catholic Church” in the Church’s belief that divorce would promote “destruction of family life” (qtd. in O’Connor 47). The passing of the referendum now allows Irish women the ability to leave a marriage, and the government has

quelled early worries of divorcee's financial hardship by enacting legislation that provides economic security for newly divorced Irish people.

Like the second referendum on divorce, another referendum on abortion surfaced during the 1990s in Ireland. However unlike the overt success of the divorce issue, this referendum would only offer ambiguous and partially-beneficial rights to pregnant women seeking abortion. This passing of this referendum was significantly fueled by the widely public "X" case in Ireland, centered on a fourteen-year-old's attempt to have an abortion in England after she was raped and impregnated. When the attorney general was made aware of the girl's desire to obtain an abortion, she was denied permission to proceed with the termination. The girl and her parents took the issue to court, and the ensuing case received international attention. In the end, the court eventually offered a hazy ruling that allows for the young woman to travel abroad for an abortion. The judge noted

The construction (destruction) of 'woman' which emerges overwhelmingly from these and other statements by both the male judiciary and the (even more male) Catholic Church leaders is of a subordinate being (hardly a 'citizen'), morally irresponsible and intellectually unreliable, whose 'agency', insofar as she is allowed agency at all, requires to be controlled by the (patriarchal) state for the 'greater good'. (Qtd. in O'Connor 92).

In the end, the young girl miscarried before she needed to make the decision whether or not she would obtain the abortion. Following the "X" case, the abortion referendum passed, yet it only ensured women "a right to information about [abortion] services and a right to travel abroad to obtain them" (O'Connor 52).

The partial success of the second abortion referendum was due in part to the wide media coverage following the “X” case. Ireland’s economic boom soon followed the case, and the Celtic Tiger may offer a rationale for authors’ sudden focus on Irish cultural issues. The term “Celtic Tiger” has been used frequently in the description and reviews of new Irish literature. In a review for Roddy Doyle’s forthcoming novel *Paula Spencer*, Daniel Trilling notes that “the city around Paula is undergoing rapid transformation thanks to the ‘Celtic Tiger’” (59). With the boom over a decade old, the expression “Celtic Tiger” has been completely integrated into Irish dialogue. Further, as Trilling notes, Irish authors are suddenly engaging with a new Ireland, a country whose cities are “undergoing rapid transformation.” In his article “The Irish Novel in Crisis? The Example of John McGahern,” Eamon Maher argues that “Given the rapid rate of social and economic change in Ireland in the past few decades, it would be logical to expect that the novel form should have undergone, and be undergoing, serious upheaval” (58). Maher tentatively contends that the Celtic Tiger would likely change the form or focus of Irish novels. While this argument is broad and difficult to prove, perhaps the Celtic Tiger has inspired Irish authors’ to incorporate actual Irish events into their literature.

Edna O’Brien’s novel *Down by the River* (1997) retells the story of the “X” case, illuminating the need for constitutional change that would partially be achieved in the subsequent referendum. O’Brien’s publication of the novel is particularly fitting during the third wave of feminism, as it parallels the movement’s goals of alleviating women’s subjugation already being debated and discussed in the political arena.

Reviews of the novel were generally favorable; however, like the critics who disapproved of O’Brien’s writing thirty years earlier, Carolyn See called the novel “Way too far-fetched, way too melodramatic,” and due in part to the explicitness of the text, See finds that “The author went

way over the top on this one” (B02). While the novel’s sexually explicit scenes describe gruesome accounts of incest and violence, they are necessary for the development of the story. Throughout the course of the text abuse silences Mary, the young girl raped and impregnated by her own father. When Mary’s father learns that she is pregnant, he takes a “broken and splintered broom handle” and “thrust[s] it inside her, the whirling of it in exact ratio to his crazed words, his intent far exceeding anything the implement could do” (DBTR 106). During this, her third rape, Mary finds that her “pain was being converted into something other, so that she was all wound, only wound,” thereby allowing her to survive her father’s attack. By the end of the text, the frequent “conversion” of pain allows Mary to experience an emotional catharsis, bringing her a voice with which she can finally speak for all Irish women. Forced to sing in front of a crowd in a pub, Mary’s voice was “low and tremulous at first, then it rose and caught, it soared and dipped and soared, a great crimson quiver of sound going up, up to the skies and they were silent then, plunged into a sudden and melting silence because what they were hearing was in answer to their own souls’ innermost cries” (265). Since a catharsis can only occur in the wake of an intense emotional experience, the early graphic scenes were not “melodramatic,” but entirely necessary for the successful development of O’Brien’s novel.

O’Brien’s successful execution of the novel leaves the reader frustrated and dissatisfied with the government’s referendum. The government’s solution to allow impregnated women to “travel abroad” for abortions successfully dodges the problem of abortion in Ireland (O’Connor 52). O’Brien ensures that Mary’s resonating voice at the conclusion of the novel remains with the reader, urging the continuation of the fight to return control of Irish women’s reproductive rights to women.

Men's Foray into the Feminist World

While the third-wave of feminism engages with a tremendous number of women's issues and can be analyzed in light of many feminist ideologies, this discussion will focus on the period's interaction with men alongside O'Brien's third-wave writing. Just as dividing contemporary Irish history into the three periods of Irish feminism precludes discussion of other important historical events, this discussion's focus on the sudden introduction of men into the feminist arena does not suggest that this is the main identifying characteristic of third wave of feminism. Rather, this section will briefly consider O'Brien's altered representation of men during her third wave writing, and lead into an examination of the writing of O'Brien's ex-husband and son, Ernest and Carlo Gébler respectively.

Kathy Sheridan's article published in the *Irish Times* on the 26th of May, 1997, points to the changing role of men in the feminist sphere. Sheridan recounts a discussion she overheard at a Dublin bank:

'I'm sick of them all. I'm voting for a woman.' The speaker is a male bank manager who seems faintly shocked at himself. The only woman candidate available to him is Democratic Left. 'Her politics do nothing for me,' he admits, 'but God – I just want an end to the tub-thumping-point-scoring rubbish, double talk and sleaze. And women don't seem to get involved in that stuff.' (FD 289-290)

This man's feminism is difficult to decipher; he supports women entering political office, yet he defends himself by offering an idealized vision of all female political candidates. However, Sheridan argues that that this is still a good sign for Irish men, particularly since women made up

only fourteen per cent of parliament in 1997. If this division were to change, then both sexes need to vote for women.

Prior to 1980 and the beginning of the third-wave of feminism, Irish female academics urged their respective universities to form distinct departments focused on women's studies in Irish universities. This suggestion was fueled by the exclusion of women from Irish history texts, with the hope that a separate field would ensure that such omission would not be repeated. While women's studies took off in America and Europe, the field never took hold in Ireland. Linda Connolly notes that

Most feminist scholars remain employed in their original discipline, because academic appointments are rarely made entirely in the field of women's studies in Ireland. There is no separate school or 'Department of Women's Studies' in an Irish university. The vast majority of academics contribute to women's studies programmes and centres on a voluntary basis, on top of their formal departmental commitments and terms of employment. (22)

To this day, gender-specific fields (namely women's studies) have not been formed in Irish universities. Yet by the third wave of feminism, feminists tend to feel that Irish universities' absence of women's studies is not necessarily problematic. Connolly notes that women's studies "raises problems for advancing the study of gender ... for instance, a 'separate' study of women acknowledges that 'by focusing on women, similarities between the experiences of men and women may be obscured'" (22). Feminism is not all about women anymore; the field has adopted gender studies and offers a voice for lesbians, homosexual men, and other marginalized groups based on gender. As such, Connolly and other feminists no longer agree that gender-specific studies are aligned with their revised feminist ideology: not only do "women and men

interact in most social contexts,” but gender-specific studies have been shown to “actively exclude men or, intrinsically, have the effect of excluding or alienating men from women’s studies” (22). Third-wave feminism now offers a voice for men, particularly men who are willing to work alongside women feminists.

Like the changing opinions of feminists during the third-wave, Edna O’Brien’s feminist ideologies transformed as she wrote during the 1980s, 90s, and 2000s. O’Brien’s first- and second-wave writing elicited comments from critics annoyed with the frequent negative representation of men. Lynette Carpenter, irritated with O’Brien’s handling of male characters, notes that “O’Brien’s men, after all, are almost uniformly unlikable, often despicable. Their escape from punishment reinforces Baba’s image of a misogynistic male deity whose sympathies are with other men” (Carpenter 269-270). However, O’Brien’s sentiments shifted during the recent decades: in an interview with Colín O’Connor in 2003, O’Brien notes: “I think in the 1960’s when my early books came out, they spoke very particularly to and for women. But in my later books (...) the men and women are all in the same stew—well the same emotional stew anyhow” (41). Paralleling the evolution of feminist thought during the 1980s and onward, O’Brien’s recent work considers the pressures placed upon men as well as women. Not only has O’Brien’s writing engaged with the ever-changing culture of Celtic Tiger Ireland, but she has also developed alongside the rapidly developing Irish feminist discourse.

Down by the River is a pivotal text in terms of O’Brien’s third-wave feminist development. The novel portrays some men as rather misogynistic, while other men are shown to be just as injured as the women. Heather Ingman describes O’Brien’s treatment of Mary’s father, who embodies O’Brien’s older view of men: “In the opening scene, Mary’s father measures out his property before proceeding to rape his daughter, showing that he has both land

and female bodies under his control” (261). However, Luke, a drifter who houses Mary during her escape from home, is implicated in the rape of the young girl and treated with disdain by the police. While Luke is incarcerated for the crime he did not commit, he realizes that he is unduly reviled by both the authorities and the country. The description of his cell points to this hatred:

They had not left him a bucket and he guessed why. They wanted him to wet himself and witness the pool which would wander along the floor and be half absorbed into the concrete yet retain the particular haphazard and shameful traces of itself, that and the smell, so that they could call him pig when they came to let him out. (DBTR 177)

By calling Luke a “pig,” the police successfully castigate one of the most compassionate male characters in the novel. Because the authorities trust neither Luke nor Mary, Luke is shown to suffer alongside O’Brien’s maltreated women. In this case, O’Brien is ensuring that she does not engage in the older feminist practice of “obscuring” the “experiences of men” (Connolly 22).

The male characters in O’Brien’s most recent novel, *The Light of Evening* (2006), continue in O’Brien’s trajectory of optimistic treatment that began to materialize in *Down by the River*. During her short stay in Brooklyn, Dilly falls in love with Gabriel, an older man. Just as she finds herself imagining a life with Gabriel, Dilly receives word that Gabriel is seeing another woman. Dilly quickly sinks into depression, and realizes the only way to recovery is to return to Ireland. It is not until years later that Dilly learns Gabriel never really deserted her, but that the letter she received was a fabrication by her jealous friends. Instead of portraying the man as the malevolent character, O’Brien unveils the viciousness of other women.

The main focus of *The Light of Evening* has also shifted from O’Brien’s first- and second-wave feminist novels. O’Brien is no longer chiefly concerned with the romantic life and

subsequent subjugation of her heroines; instead, the new novel centers on the mother and daughter relationship. Dilly is at the core, and the novel explores two separate mother-daughter pairings; the first between Dilly and her mother and the other between Dilly and her children. Eleanora, Dilly's daughter, finds herself feeling unsettled as a result from her intermittently tumultuous relationship with her mother. Eleanora attempts to deal with the trauma by writing about her grievances in a journal. Upon Eleanora's realization that her mother read the rather stinging journal only moments before her death, Eleanora says, "Oh Father, oh Mother, forgive us, for we know not what we do" (TLOE 246). Paralleling this statement, Dilly's final letter to Eleanora says: "You have not forgotten us or our creature comforts but there is something that bugs me. It hurts the way you make yourself so aloof, always running away from us, running running to where. Are we lepers or what. Or what" (TLOE 292). While Eleanora is unable to reconcile her relationship with her mother, she successfully voices her grievances in the journal, allowing her some comfort.

While Dilly reconsiders her life as she lies in her hospital bed, the narrator notes that "for Dilly the crux of her thinking is her family, her children, disentangling the hurts they have caused her" (TLOE 124). This "disentangling the hurts" is done throughout the novel, as Dilly reconsiders various interactions with her children, and even reflects upon her own relationship with her mother. By way of this examination, Dilly is likened to other Irish mothers in that she will surrender anything for her children. When Dilly refuses the gift of a shawl from her daughter, the nun "with a petulance ask why should it be too good for her, she a mother like every Irish mother, sacrificing her own life for her young" (TLOE 208). O'Brien proves that her concept of motherhood has remained unchanged throughout her career; Dilly is portrayed as "sacrificial" like O'Brien's earlier mothers, particularly the women of *The Country Girls Trilogy*.

Yet *The Light of Evening*'s absolute focus on the mother-daughter relationship is indicative of the author's third-wave shift, pointing to a now lessened concern with the repression of the Irish patriarchy.

O'Brien's Men Respond

More often than not, the first few pages of any critical writing on O'Brien explores either O'Brien's tumultuous reception and the critic's proposed rationale behind it, or the autobiographical elements in O'Brien's texts (and occasionally, both topics together). The autobiographical quality of O'Brien's writing is not to be ignored; it offers a window into the author's life while it enhances the writing itself. Significantly, the autobiographical portions of O'Brien's texts explored alongside the writing of both Ernest and Carlo Gébler offer a three-way 'discussion' amongst O'Brien's family. This discussion will reveal the origin of O'Brien's early feminist beliefs, Ernest Gébler's lack of feminist beliefs, and Carlo Gébler's voice of a new, younger generation of male feminists. In order to construct this 'discussion,' Edna O'Brien's novel *Time and Tide* (1992), Ernest Gébler's *The Old Man and the Girl* (1968) and *Shall I Eat You Now?* (1969), and Carlo Gébler's *Father and I: A Memoir* (2001), "The Chekov Student" (1996), and "The Cowboy Suit" (1996) will be explored.

Ernest Gébler was the son of Czech immigrant Adolph Gébler, a man who earned a modest living in Dublin as an orchestra member for Radio Éireann. Spending his childhood between Counties Wicklow and Dublin, Ernest Gébler identified himself as Irish, yet was often mistaken for a foreigner. Admiring his father, Ernest Gébler modeled his own life after the man who he believed was always "slaving to support his family" (Gébler 20). Yet Adolph Gébler was a staunch supporter of patriarchal values, something his wife, Margaret, would battle with

during their marriage. Due to his insidious alcoholism, Adolph Gébler squandered a substantial amount of the family's income on liquor. Carlo Gebler recalls being told about his grandmother's retaliation against the older Gebler tyrant: after strategically placing a wine crate outside the door of their house, Margaret watched her husband return home and trip over the crate, provoking her to "whoop with joy" (Gebler 20). Carlo Gebler realizes that "she had not just felled the wicked patriarch, but hoisted him on his own petard by felling him with the crate of wine on which he had selfishly squandered the family's scarce resources" (Gébler 20-21). Yet Ernest was blind to his father's pitfalls and admired him, subjecting his future wife and son to his own patriarchal oppression.

Ernest Gébler told his son that he not only began writing his first novel during his teenage years, but also educated himself, even learning how to read without assistance. Carlo Gébler does not suggest that his father was a modest man; he instead recalls his father's habit of frequently bragging about his own accomplishments, rarely offering praise for anyone but himself. His first novel *He Had My Heart Scalded* (1946) was banned in Ireland, and his second book *The Plymouth Adventure, The Voyage of the Mayflower* (1950) was successful, and was even produced as a film soon after. Gébler moved to America where he worked briefly in Hollywood, eventually marrying an American woman with whom he had a son, Karl (like Carlo, Ernest also named this son after Karl Marx). The marriage was short lived; the couple divorced and Gébler cut off ties with his first son. In 1954 Gébler married twenty-four year-old Edna O'Brien after meeting her in a Dublin party. The marriage became tumultuous quickly, and, as O'Brien tells Richard Woodrow, "He was a stern man. There's a bit of Mr. Rochester in him" (50). Woodrow notes that the marriage quickly failed: "One night, in the middle of making dinner, she walked out. They were divorced and Gébler moved back to Ireland. O'Brien raised

her boys on her own” (50). G bler’s writing subsequent to his marriage to O’Brien reveals his strongly-patriarchal views alongside unflattering women who are reminiscent of Edna O’Brien herself.

O’Brien’s tendency to include representations of her own life within her writing is revealed early in her career. Caithleen in *The Country Girls* is very similar O’Brien; both Caithleen and O’Brien grew up in rural Clare, both women attended a convent school, and both women married domineering men, subsequently moving to London in an attempt to escape from their Irish families. Caithleen’s love interests are undoubtedly representative of Ernest G bler. While most scholarship likens G bler with Caithleen’s husband Eugene Gaillard, G bler has also been compared to Mr Gentleman, and G bler’s obituary even offers this comparison: “it is thought that the character of Mr Gentleman, who lures young Irish girls away from their families, in O’Brien’s early novels is modelled on [Ernest G bler]” (*The Guardian* 16). However, Comparing Ernest G bler with Eugene is far more productive, and this pairing is a more likely match. Caithleen’s description of the evening Eugene offers her a new jacket is revealing: “Then one night he stayed in a hotel in Harcourt Street and planned to meet me at lunchtime the next day in order to buy me a coat. It was coming near Christmastime, and anyhow, my old green coat was shabby. He bought me a gray astrakhan with a red velvet collar and a flared skirt” (CGT 202). In Richard Woodrow’s article “Reveling in Heartbreak: Edna O’Brien,” O’Brien recounts a similar occurrence during her early days with G bler: “‘I was asked to go to a pub with some other literati ... I was wearing very shabby clothes. This handsome man said: ‘You can’t wear those clothes. I’m going to buy you a coat’ ... I married him soon after’” (50). This early textual reference to O’Brien’s life foreshadows a career of

similar autobiographical allusions, many of which serve as O'Brien's plea against the subjugation she herself experienced.

Michelle Woods' article "Red, Un-Read, and Edna: Ernest Gébler and Edna O'Brien" offers the first significant examination of O'Brien and Gébler's life as discussed through each others' writing. She suggests that "O'Brien and Gébler each occupies a room in the metaphorical homes of the other's fiction, even when they literally cannot live under the same roof" (64). Woods' unprecedented work does not only propose the fictionalization of each others' relationship, but also reveals their rather similar literary receptions. Most notably, Woods argues that

both authors were banned in Ireland because of the explicit sexual content of their novels, both (together) left Ireland to write in England, both achieved considerable success early on in their careers but were not recognized as authors of literary fiction, and both remain to some extent somewhat removed from Irish canonical writing, though O'Brien's work has recently begun to be accepted as integral to the Irish canon. (55-56)

Woods is correct in highlighting the pair's similarities, and while she reads the character of Maureen in Gébler's novel *Shall I Eat You Now?* (1969) as representative of O'Brien, I find that the character of Anne in Gébler's book *The Old Man and the Girl* offers a similar portrait of O'Brien while simultaneously revealing Gébler's misogyny. This novel centers on Thomas and Anne's holiday in Tyrrhenia and the months following the trip. Thomas, the narrator, is a writer; and as the title suggests, much older than his wife, Anne. Thomas lives an austere life, and after his wife's nagging to take a vacation, he decides that "[w]ith all the circumstances so auspicious I had no grounds for objecting to a holiday, though I regarded the prospect as a waste of valuable

time” (OM 5). Thomas’s domineering bent is apparent early; he makes the decisions in the marriage, and generally considers his wife’s needs as secondary and inferior to his own.

Not only does the title *The Old Man and the Girl* suggest the couple’s age gap, but the differing ages are once again emphasized early in the novel. The novel opens with Thomas discussing his upcoming holiday plans with Anne. Because Anne “had never been out of England,” Thomas decides to allow Anne to “choose the place and nature of her first Continental holiday when the time came” (OM 5). When Thomas attempts to sway Anne’s decision to travel by car, Thomas notes both his inability to allow Anne to make decision for herself while highlighting his own age: “[b]ut Anne was in any circumstances opposed to the car, on the grounds that it was so old (‘older,’ I used to say, like me)” (OM 6). A few pages later, Thomas makes the age gap with his wife explicit, “I was sixteen years older,” Thomas says, “and beginning to feel like an older man” (OM 20). The earlier reference to the couple’s differing ages is sufficient for the characterization of the couple—the reader understands that Thomas is significantly older than Anne—yet Gébler’s insistence in making Thomas and Anne’s age difference overt is telling. Since Gelber himself was sixteen years older than O’Brien, the continued references serve as a confirmation of Gébler’s fictionalization of O’Brien.

Perhaps Gébler found that the numerous references to Thomas and Anne’s differing ages were inadequate in completely highlighting the fictionalization of his relationship with O’Brien. As such, it is very likely that Gébler actually chose the title of his book from a passage in *The Lonely Girl*, signifying both the fictionalization of his relationship with O’Brien while and his response to O’Brien and her text. In *The Lonely Girl*, Caithleen describes the early portion of an evening with her future husband. She is busy putting on her makeup while Eugene monitors Caithleen from behind:

Before dinner he carried a white china lamp upstairs to the dressing table in his room so that I could make up my face. He stayed there, watching, while I applied pancake makeup with a dam sponge and spread it over my face evenly. It made me pale. In the mirror my face looked round and childlike.

‘The old man and the girl,’ he said to the spotted mirror, which was wedged at the right angle by a face-cream jar—one of Laura’s no doubt.” (CGT 233)

O’Brien’s short passage is most certainly directed toward Gébler. Eugene’s comment “The old man and the girl” is certainly not endearing; if anything it evokes a sense of decrepitude in the relationship. Further, Caithleen’s realization that the face-cream jar is Laura’s is significant in that Laura is likely a fictionalization of Gébler’s first wife, Leatrice Gilbert. Both Gilbert and Laura are American, and both left their marriages with and returned to America with their only child. Caithleen soon learns that Eugene is still corresponding with Laura: “Laura’s letter came on Saturday,” Caithleen notes, “Her name was on the back of the pink envelope; his name, in fact—Mrs. Laura Gaillard. He did not show it to me, but in the afternoon, when he went out, I rooted among his papers and found it” (CGT 341). In Carlo Gébler’s *Father and I: A Memoir*, Gébler recounts his half-brother’s girlfriend’s discovery of Ernest Gébler’s letters in Leatrice’s home: “Linda went east to Leatrice’s house and started to work. One day, she picked up a thick bundle of letters marked Ernest Gébler” (FI 346). Ernest Gébler, then, had been corresponding with Leatrice throughout his marriage with O’Brien, and it is likely that similar to Caithleen, O’Brien’s protest against this correspondence earned no sympathy from Gébler. In another attempt to voice her opposition to her husband’s continued relationship with his ex-wife, O’Brien wrote the emotional abuse into her novel.

Most likely realizing his fictionalization in *The Country Girls Trilogy*, Gébler responds to O'Brien, ensuring that his rebuke is obvious by titling his novel after very the words of Eugene Gaillard. Thomas emphasizes his loveless marriage early in the novel. He notes that planning the holiday made him "realise how little I really knew of the young woman with whom I had been living for four years. It was pure romance, and she knew it" (OM 6). The second portion of the statement shows Thomas' misogyny; he justifies his involvement in a relationship with a "young woman" with whom he knows little about since he may exchange his lack of commitment with an offer of "pure romance." Thomas believes that women require nothing more than romance to keep them happy, thereby simplifying the qualities of a healthy relationship. Yet in reality, the couple's marriage is far from romantic; if Thomas and Anne ever experienced "pure romance," it is likely that it was short-lived. Thomas even recounts early marital strife; he had met a woman in Tyrrhenia on a trip years before, and it was something that continually bothered Anne. Thomas frequently alludes to this woman in conversation with Anne, and justifies his frequent references to this early love since

it was fresh with me, and because at heart there is something prim and conventional about me, which insisted that a wife should know the facts of her husband's life ... But the whole thing was made too easy for me by Anne's eager questioning: I have never been able to understand her desire to possess my past as well as my present and future. (OM 9)

Like Anne, Caithleen is often questioning Eugene about his earlier romance, and like Thomas, Eugene cannot understand Caithleen's interest in her husband's life. Gébler, then, suggests that O'Brien's youth and "eager[ness]" account for her curiosity, not her natural interest in her husband's life.

Yet Gébler's criticism of O'Brien becomes more severe and, like Eugene, Thomas blames the couple's marital breakdown on his wife. Thomas continually notes that he was most happy during the years before he met Anne, and is frustrated that his wife is irritated by his frequent reminiscing over the past. Thomas recalls his first love and wonders "how could I explain an emotion that I did not myself understand, except to say that I had been 'happy'"(OM 9). Anne's choice to travel to Tyrrhenia is no surprise: she hopes to replace her husband's memory of his first love with her own image. Yet Thomas even denies Anne the potential to redeem her marriage, blaming the breakdown on Anne: "and so, after all this time, she had to take me back to Tyrrhenia in the hope that, in that setting, I might let drop some honest clue to the nature of that happiness which, she knew sadly, it had never been in her power to give me" (OM 9). Thomas believes that the health of the marriage alongside his own happiness is Anne's sole responsibility. Not only does Thomas fail to consider Anne's own emotional wellbeing, but he offers Anne no redemption even in light of her desperate attempt to piece together a marriage broken by Thomas himself.

Thomas' sexism is overt; his observations frequently imply his belief in women's inferiority to men. Like Ellen's husband in O'Brien's *August is a Wicked Month*, Thomas feels it is his responsibility to "teach" Anne how to live a proper life. Thomas quickly stops himself from showing emotion during dinner in Tyrrhenia, realizing that it is the "sort of wooly emotional thinking which I had always derided in others, and which I had taught Anne to avoid" (OM 35). The use of the word "taught" implies inequality; as the teacher, Thomas is inherently superior to Anne. Yet as the novel continues, Thomas' misogynistic attitude becomes even more obvious. After arriving home from Tyrrhenia and meeting with a group of male friends in London, Thomas notes that

Looking at each other we were surprised that circumstances should have brought together in this room the three most intelligent men in the world in a perfect harmony of intellectual sympathy. And through this haze there loomed of course that ubiquitous spectre which ever attends such sessions: the powerful conviction of male superiority, of male self-sufficiency, of the destructive influence of the female. If it were not for women, we felt, such balanced impersonal wisdom as we were exchanging now would be the daily fare of men: then how much saner a place the world would be. It seemed to us absurd that we should ever allow the claims of any woman to stand between us and such rapport as this. (OM 102)

The passage does not follow with any realization of his flawed opinion or suggestion of sarcasm; instead, the comment points to Thomas' (and Gébler's) embittered attitude toward women. Published only five years after his divorce with O'Brien, it is likely that Gébler is still reeling from his marital breakdown.

While much of O'Brien's writing following *The Country Girls Trilogy* contains minor references to her life and marriage, it was not until O'Brien's novel *Time and Tide* (1992) that the author offers a vocal response to Gébler's *The Old Man and the Girl*. *Time and Tide* centers on the life of Nell, a young woman who is initially married to an older man. In near-perfect resemblance to O'Brien's own life, the novel traces the couple's marital breakdown, Nell's fight for a divorce, and the subsequent life in which she raises her two sons. In his article "Edna O'Brien: Reveling in Heartbreak," Woodward describes O'Brien's recollection of her own marriage and consideration of Gébler as a "Mr. Rochester" figure (50). In *Time and Tide*, Nell compares her husband, Walter, to Mr. Rochester himself:

Formerly, he had had his periods of huff; he would not talk, except to issue an edict or make a stinging remark, but after a few days he would relent, put his arms around her, taking her unawares, and saying what a grump he was. Those moments reminded her of what it must have been like for Jane Eyre when she sensed a certain thaw in Mr. Rochester's granite demeanor. To Nell, Jane Eyre and Mr. Rochester were very near, far nearer than her neighbors. (TT 20)

O'Brien's description of her own marriage to the relationship in *Jane Eyre* suggests that Walter is another fictionalized Gébler. Like Gébler, Walter was married before he met Nell, and the first wife's belongings and notes were left in the home, causing Nell "to be very jealous of such things and once had even tried to wipe out the [first wife's] writing" (TT 28). Yet the failing marriage slowly quelled Nell's jealousy, and now "nothing racked her, only the thought of this hideous marriage, her body withering away, his dislike of her rampantly voiced, as if he had always wanted to dislike her, as if in fact that's why he had chosen her" (TT 28).

Like Caithleen, marriage was the only possibility for Nell, and in its failure she is lost; Nell realizes she "could not leave him, that was certain; she could not stay with him, that, too, was certain" (27). Yet Nell, like O'Brien herself, finds the courage to leave Walter after he forces his wife to sign over her paycheck for her work as a literary critic. The narrator describes Nell's final act of submission to her tyrant husband:

She went down the hall and signed her full name, even her middle name, on the cheque, went into the kitchen, looked at the children in the garden shouting and scampering about, and thought, I cannot spend another minute under this roof. She walked back into the hall, opened the creosoted cupboard where the coats

were, put on her grey coat, and went out of the house, for what she knew would be forever. (TT 35)

Carlo Gébler recalls the evening his mother left Ernest Gébler. Like Walter, Gébler demanded the money O'Brien earned for *The Country Girls Trilogy*. O'Brien handed over her check and left the house, where Carlo later "found the front door standing open. The porch light was on. I knew then that the worst thing had happened" (FI 100).

Walter's misogynistic nature is shown early in the text. Like Eugene, Walter communicates curtly through notes to his wife. The narrator recalls that "[h]er husband's communications were by letter, terse bulletins such as 'The sheets need changing' or 'No more burnt parsnips, if you please'" (TT 27). Nell describes Walter's most vicious note: "Once he wrote on a large sheet of paper—'Now and then he did not think that all women could possibly be bitches, but reality was always at hand to reassure him'" (TT 27). Illuminating a certain hatred of women, Walter's comment is much like Thomas' rant in Gébler's *The Old Man and the Girl*, in which Walter argues that women have a "destructive influence" on men (OM 102). After both his failed marriages, Gébler comments that "authors make a fateful mistake and change their woman ... which leaves that author spiritually disillusioned and minus his favourite household implements" (Pine 16). Gébler objectifies an author's wife by referring to her as "their woman," but also suggests that the male author's role in the breakdown of a marriage is his mistake only in that he "change[s]" her, and it is the wife's fault that the man is subsequently traumatized.

Ernest Gébler's novel *Shall I Eat You Now?* (1969) showcases the author's increasingly misogynistic attitude even since the publication of *The Old Man and the Girl* only one year

earlier. The protagonist, Benjamin Hoffman, is similar to Walter of *Time and Tide*. Michelle Woods notes the novel's (and Hoffman's) tone:

Shall I Eat You Now? is, on the face of it, a deeply misogynistic book, riven with cannibalistic metaphors, such as Hoffman's description of women as 'fallopian tubes with teeth', and of assertions such as '[i]t is not only homosexuals who don't like women – hardly anyone likes them .. women were animals and should be treated as animals.' (Woods 63)

Benjamin's ex-wife, an Irish woman called Maureen Dingle Murphy, has just left the marriage due to her mounting notoriety and realization that her husband will only impede increased fame. Serving as Gébler's next version of a fictionalized O'Brien, Maureen tells Benjamin that "I married you to get a home in London from where I could make my career ... I'm going to be famous in my career and have lots and lots of handsome men making love to me" (129).

Maureen's admission of her malevolent intention to use her husband merely as a means to success parallels Gébler's claim that he actually wrote O'Brien's first two novels of *The Country Girls Trilogy*. Soon after the couple's divorce, Gébler announced that the only contribution O'Brien made toward the texts was through her scribbled diary entries which Gébler used as inspiration for the novels. Carlo Gébler described the 'deal' his father claims he made with O'Brien: "Edna wanted to publish and he wanted children; so, they did a deal. A book for a child. He wrote the books. She gave him the children he wanted" (FI 308). During the 1960s and 70s neither O'Brien nor Gébler could offer any determinable proof of authorship of the texts, and it was not until Carlo Gébler's memoir that the issue is finally clarified. Gébler writes:

I recalled my mother, during our first miserable winter in Cannon Hill Lane, talking to herself under her breath as she hammered away at her typewriter. That

was when she was writing *The Country Girls*. Later, I remembered spotting her through the filthy window of the hut at the bottom of the garden. This was when she was writing *The Girl with Green Eyes*. I had witnessed my mother writing the books herself, and despite that, [Ernest Gébler] could come up with this [lie]. It was incredible. (FI 308)

Carlo Gébler's memoir serves as a lens through which one may truly evaluate Edna O'Brien and Ernest Gébler's respective fictionalizations of each other. Of course, the memoir's portrayal of Ernest Gébler as a negative and jaded man alongside the representation of O'Brien as a warm-hearted victim of Gébler's wrath begs the question of Carlo Gébler's bias. Significantly, Carlo Gébler found his father difficult to live with, and in a relationship-ending decision, chose to live with his mother after his parent's divorce. Yet nearly all the scholarship on Ernest Gébler is in accord with his son's evaluation. Even the title of Ernest Gébler's obituary, "Ernest Gébler: No Saint in Ireland," verifies Carlo Gébler's depiction of his father.

Even if Carlo Gébler's texts never referred to Ernest Gébler, Carlo's father would still disapprove of his son's pro-feminist voice. Carlo Gébler is certainly a writer who has benefited from the third wave of feminism, and like Connolly notes, is writing during a time in which his own voice may be considered among female feminist writers. Carlo Gébler's feminist voice is often explicit in the young author's recollection and derision of his father's stilted beliefs. Most often, Ernest Gébler's hatred for women is filtered through his contempt toward Edna O'Brien and her family. In frustration with Carlo's relationship with his mother, Ernest Gébler tells his son that he will never be able to attain "humanity," since the O'Brien "hereditary" will prevent it (FI 216). Ernest Gébler also believes that physical disease is due to women. Carlo recalls that his father

was very careful with his posture because of poker back, or ankylosis
spondylitis, which I knew was its proper, medical name. My father had explained
it to me many times. This was a disease to which we Gébblers were particularly
susceptible. It was carried in the female gene but only men suffered from it. This
detail struck him as particularly poignant and significant. (FI 109)

While Ernest Gébler realizes his case of ‘poker back’ could not be directly attributed to O’Brien since he himself suffered from the disease, he shifts the fault to the Gébler women. Portraying his female relatives nearly as malevolently as he portrays O’Brien, Ernest Gébler calls his mother and aunts “a succession of appalling women” (FI 147). Yet Carlo Gébler uses his memoir to deride Ernest Gébler’s misogyny, offering a completely antithetical attitude than that of his father. When Carlo and his father meet a homosexual man during a camping trip, Ernest Gébler tells his son that “‘No child should go near that kind of man ... Do you hear? He’s the type who hangs around men’s lavatories and interferes with children. You are not to go near him and if he offers you anything, if he offers you sweets, anything, you come and find me right away, do you understand?’” (FI 160) In response, Carlo Gébler notes that “[m]y heart sank” since his father “sometimes [called] them queers, and he loathed them” (FI 159). If Ernest Gébler grew up to appear much like his father Adolph, then Carlo successfully broke from the pattern.

Like Carlo Gébler’s sympathetic voice in *Father & I: A Memoir*, much of his fiction showcases his feminist leanings; most notably, Gébler’s male and female characters are portrayed as inherently equal. In his short story “The Chekhov Student” (1996), Douglas Peter has been married for forty years and is “extremely miserable” (W9 9). Yet Douglas does not place the blame for the marital strife exclusively on his wife; instead, he examines his marriage

and understands that its collapse is due both to his wife and himself. After a rather vociferous argument, Douglas finds his wife, Natasha, in the kitchen. It is Douglas who begins the conversation, and Natasha replies “as if nothing had happened” (W9 12). After each fight, Douglas notes that “[w]henver we have a row [Natasha] always puts [vodka] and a couple of glasses in the icebox. It is as established a part of our arguments as is my locking myself in my study” (W9 12-13). After their obligatory drink, the couple returns to their normal state of apathy until they begin the next fight. When reflecting upon the couple’s argument, Douglas shares responsibility for the disagreement with his wife: he notes that “[t]his is how it always is with us. One of us says they’re ‘sorry’ then the other says they’re ‘sorry’. It does not matter who says it first. We do not make an issue of it. It just so happened it was Natasha. Next time it could be me” (W9 13). While the marriage is certainly tumultuous, both spouses are equally implicated in the conflict. In essence, Gébler effectively rewrites the scenes of domestic strife explored in the fiction of both his parents. For both O’Brien and the elder Gébler, the blame fell either on the male or female character; in Gébler’s story, both man and woman are similarly at fault.

Carlo Gébler’s short story “The Cowboy Suit” (1996) illustrates the author’s notion of equality between men and women while simultaneously offering a fictionalization of his own misogynistic father. The early description of the setting points to the semi-autobiographical nature of the story; the young narrator lives in London but is currently staying in Ireland with his grandparents for the summer. The story is set in July, 1962, and the narrator is eight-years-old. The similarities between the young boy and author already cannot be ignored; Gébler himself was born in 1954, so he also would be eight-years-old in 1962. In his memoir, Gébler describes similar trips to his mother’s parent’s house; not surprisingly, Ernest Gébler disapproved of these

visits since he felt that the O'Brien family was of poor "heredity" (FI 216). Yet the narrator describes the kindness of his grandmother; not only does she quell the narrator after his jealous schoolmate, Dennis Meekins, ripped the badge from his beloved sheriff costume, but she offers him a "[s]wiss roll for tea," complete "with fresh cream" (W9 136). The young boy finds solace in his grandmother, the offering of sweets made him realize "[t]hat is the funny thing about disappointment, and I have noticed this before. You have something bad happen, and then something good happens and the bad goes away" (136). In the young boy's life, his grandmother is frequently bringing him "something good," often in an attempt to mediate the austerity of his father.

The story begins with the young narrator about to attend a rehearsal for his upcoming recitation of a poem in the local church's feis (traditional Irish dance competition). The young boy is particularly nervous given that the event that will draw his often malevolent father from London. After the competition's dress rehearsal, the narrator stands in the front yard of his grandparents' house and gazes at the clouds. It is at that moment when his father arrives, and he tells the narrator that "[s]tanding like that you confirm what I've always thought ... you really are a moron" (W9 138). The young boy verifies that the comment was not made in jest: "[w]hat he is saying is not friendly although it is said like a joke, and I don't know what to say back" (W9 138). Yet the fictionalization of Ernest Gébler is most obvious in the father's next comment. In an attempt to criticize both the young boy and his mother, the father says, "You've got your mother's genes and her family are famously stupid" (W9 139). When the narrator defends himself, the father retorts, "why are you staring at the hills like a retard then? And incidentally, you look ridiculous in that getup" (W9 139). The father's dig at the boy's mother is nearly identical to Ernest Gébler's frequent derision of Edna O'Brien and her family.

For the young narrator, the sheer malevolence of his father is delivered not through frequent insults, but instead through his confiscation of the young boy's favorite possession. After his father departs for London, the narrator realizes that his cowboy suit is missing. Upon querying his grandmother, she sadly tells the narrator:

Your father thought you didn't need it any more, that you'd had good use of it and played with it often enough, and he thought it would be a good thing to give it to someone who didn't have the same advantages as you, and so he brought it down this morning to the Meekins' house and he left it there for Dennis. Mrs Meekin apparently said something about Dennis wanting a cowboy suit at the feis." (W9 151).

The narrator's father certainly knew the immense pain the boy would feel when he realized that not only is his costume missing, but that it had been given to the malicious Dennis Meekins. After the agonizing incident, the narrator can only enjoy slight comfort from his grandmother: she adheres the torn cowboy badge to one of her husband's old hats, and offers the narrator a broomstick as a rifle. While the young, fictionalized Gébler knew that he would always lose arguments with his father in fights that he describes as "conversation[s] that go backwards and forwards like the ball in a tennis game, until I miss my shot," the now grownup narrator has successfully achieved the last word through the scathing fictionalization of his father (W9 139).

The intra-family discussion between Ernest Gébler, Edna O'Brien and Carlo Gébler is an interesting and critically unexplored phenomenon. The writers' fictionalizations of each other point to the immense pain of a broken family, as well as the power of literature as conversation. Significantly, the authors' writing points to three things. First, it highlights the motivation behind O'Brien's novels and provides the rationale for her desire to offer Irish women a voice in

a world where the patriarchal hegemony is supported by both her husband and her government. Second, it shows the ramifications of a father's abuse of his children and a government who allows it. At fifty years old, Carlo Gébler is still emotionally affected by his father's malevolence. Third, the intra-family discussion proves that the third wave of feminism truly allows for the men to offer their own feminist voice in the literary arena. Not only did Carlo Gébler decide to live with O'Brien during his childhood, but the third-wave of feminism allowed him to challenge the patriarchy, once again choosing to follow his mother and abandon the Gébler men's misogyny. O'Brien offers a passage in *Time and Tide* that likely serves as her final goodbye to both her fictionalized and real ex-husband:

The memories die away or are put down, the road rushes on, rushes with increasingly frenzied speed, as in our variety of clothing and disguises we are in turn husbands, wives, lovers, enemies, friends; but always sooner or later we are brought back to the dark stew of ourselves and the ancestry before us, back to the midnight of the race whose sins and whose songs we carry. (TT 260)

O'Brien's statement points to her superior character; while Ernest Gébler continued to deride Edna O'Brien even during his final moments of life, O'Brien has reconciled with her past, for she knows that as "the road rushes on," one will only find solace in pushing resentment aside.

CONCLUSION

After publishing over twenty pieces of fiction spanning forty-seven years, Edna O'Brien has proven herself a worthy member of the Irish literary canon. Her contribution to both Irish literature and society is profound; not only does O'Brien interrogate many of the pressing social issues during the particular period in which she writes, but she has offered an early feminist voice for Irish people. While her work still elicits derision from critics, O'Brien's contemporary texts are far more enthusiastically received than her early work. Because O'Brien's writing travels fairly accurately along the trajectory of Irish feminism, the shift in her critical treatment is likely due to this evolution. Since early Irish feminists (including O'Brien) vociferously attacked both men and the masculine-centered government, the rather tumultuous response to O'Brien's work is not surprising. Yet with the introduction of a more subdued feminism of the contemporary period coupled with a far more liberal Irish society, readers and critics with diverse political leanings are increasingly likely to offer a favorable response to O'Brien's texts.

In her most recent short story titled "Love's Lesson" (2005), O'Brien provides a highly sympathetic portrayal of a male character, highlighting her very contemporary and evolved feminist outlook. The plot is similar to O'Brien's early short stories: the narrator describes her relationship with a married man, and explores the ramification of an affair where one must be "done up to the nines" before beginning an illicit evening "stripped of all traces of a spouse" (268). Yet no longer is the man responsible for causing hurt, in fact, the narrator notes that "Only fools think that men and women love differently. Fools and pedagogues. I tell you, the love of men is just as heart-breaking, just as copious, just as bewildered, just as disseminating and in the end as barbaric as the love of women" (259). Rebecca Pelan accurately argues that

O'Brien's short stories "are often sociological documents that record aspects of Irish rural life as experienced by women during a particularly harsh time in Ireland's history" and that her negative critical reception is due to an "irrational confusion between the real and the imaginary on the part of the critics, rather than on the part of O'Brien herself" (34, 35). To read O'Brien's most recent story in light of Pelan's argument will clearly highlight both O'Brien's feminist shift and her tumultuous reception. O'Brien's 2003 comment that "men and women are in the same stew – well the same emotional stew ..." situates "Love's Lesson" as O'Brien's most recent "sociological document" detailing women's position in Irish society (O'Connor 41). If O'Brien's early castigation was due to her harsh appraisal of women's treatment in 1960s Ireland, then her recent writing illuminates both the author's revised feminism alongside an increasingly open-minded assortment of literary critics. Perhaps it is now that O'Brien's literature will aptly be recognized by her long awaited inclusion in the Irish literary canon.

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Notes

¹ *The Country Girls Trilogy* (1984) contains Edna O'Brien's first three novels; *The Country Girls* (1960), *The Lonely Girl* (1962) (later retitled *Girl with Green Eyes*), *Girls in their Married Bliss* (1964), and the *Epilogue* (1984).

² Before 1900, literature with Irish themes often represented the "stage-Irishman," as Declan Kiberd describes as a man who "wore trousers, drank endlessly, swore wildly, and spoke a broken but colorful brand of English, salted with Gaelic exclamations" (21).

³ Eamonn de Valera (1882-1975) was a highly influential political figure in twentieth century Ireland. During his early years he worked toward Irish independence and was active during the Civil War. He served three times as *Príomh Aire* (Irish head of government) and eventually became Ireland's president. Notably, de Valera was the author of the *Bunreacht na hÉireann* (the Irish Constitution).

⁴ Most notably, the editors of Volume VI of *The Field Day Anthology* determined and promoted the use of these periods of Irish feminism.

⁵ Quotation found in Grace Eckley's *Edna O'Brien*.

⁶ The American Movement is significantly documented by feminist Betty Friedan (1921-2006).

⁷ Women included Mairin de Burca, Mary Maher, Mairin Johnston, Maire Woods, Margaret Gaj, Mary Kenny, Mary McCutcheon, Mary Anderson, Nell McCafferty, June Levine, Nuala Fennel, Marie McMahon, Fionnuala O'Connor, Eavan Boland, Eimer Philbin Bowman, Bernadette Quinn, Rosemary Mumphries, Hilary Boyle, Mary Sheerin, Mary Earls, and Rosita and Inez Sweetman. See June Levine's article "The Women's Movement in the Republic of Ireland, 1968-1980" in the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, Volume 5, 1991. 177-187.

⁸ Ingman, "Nature, Gender and Nation: An Ecofeminist reading of two novels by Irish Women."

⁹ Yet the banning of homosexuality within the constitution dealt with "sodomy," placing it perhaps as a gay man's issue, while lesbianism's hazy legal status once again pointed to female marginalization. Nevertheless, O'Brien engages with this very second-wave feminist issue in her writing.

¹⁰ *Speaking Volumes: Edna O'Brien*, Minnesota Public Radio, October 23, 2006

¹¹ The latter quotation can be found in Helen Thompson's interview with Edna O'Brien in *Irish Women Writers Speak Out: Voices from the Field*, page 198.