

Distribution Agreement

In presenting this thesis as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known, including display on the world wide web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis.

Signature:

Jessica Annemarie Itzel

4/14/2010

Troubling Irish Women: Edna O'Brien's *Country Girls Trilogy*

by

Jessica A. Itzel

Adviser

Dr. Geraldine Higgins

Department of English

Dr. Geraldine Higgins
Adviser

Dr. Barbara Ladd
Committee Member

Dr. Yanna Yannakakis
Committee Member

4/14/2010

Troubling Irish Women: Edna O'Brien's *Country Girls Trilogy*

By

Jessica A. Itzel

Adviser

Dr. Geraldine Higgins

An abstract of
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Department of English

2010

Abstract

Troubling Irish Women: Edna O'Brien's *Country Girls Trilogy*

By Jessica A. Itzel

A decade before the women's movement launched in Ireland, Edna O'Brien shocked Irish audiences with her realistic representation of women's experience in her first novel, *The Country Girls*. This novel, followed by *The Lonely Girl* and *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, was promptly condemned by the Catholic Church and banned by the Irish Censorship Board for reasons of indecency. Despite this initially unsympathetic reaction in her home country, O'Brien became one of Ireland's most popular and widely read writers.

Even with her success, O'Brien remains a critically neglected figure in Irish literary history and deserves greater recognition for the role she played in challenging Irish patriarchal ideology as well as transforming women's writing. In this thesis, I argue that O'Brien troubles Irish women by both challenging patriarchal ideologies of womanhood in Ireland and at times, remaining complicit in them. In her first three novels, the figure of the woman becomes the contested site of patriarchal control as social order remains dependent on the submission of women. Yet O'Brien thrusts her female heroines outside prescribed roles of wife and mother, threatening the foundational structures of Irish society. Even so, she cannot divorce herself entirely from the influence of Irish ideals of womanhood and her female protagonists are punished for their transgressions.

With the publication of her early novels, Irish patriarchal authorities—namely, the Irish Catholic Church and national government—attempted to squash O'Brien's influence within Ireland but ironically, the resulting controversy elevated her to celebrity status. Using newspaper sources and letters belonging to O'Brien's collection at Emory University, I will demonstrate that the Irish reaction to O'Brien was far from homogenous. Similarly, her position in regards to Irish patriarchy remained unstable. O'Brien emerges as the first figure to openly navigate and critique Ireland's constraining constructions of womanhood and also emerges as its most successful writer. In her works and in her own life, O'Brien complicates and subverts traditional ideas of womanhood and contributes to an opening up of Irish society to women's experience and writing.

Troubling Irish Women: Edna O'Brien's *Country Girls Trilogy*

By

Jessica A. Itzel

Adviser

Dr. Geraldine Higgins

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Department of English

2010

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Early on in my research, I came across a quotation from Edna O'Brien that has stuck with me throughout the past eight months: "Writing is like carrying a fetus." Although the number of pages I've written for this thesis amounts to only a tiny fraction of the work she has produced in the past fifty years, I can relate to her feelings of attachment to her writing. This thesis has been the most difficult yet also the most eye-opening academic project I have undertaken in my college career, and I owe thanks to all of the friends, family, and Emory faculty who encouraged and supported me during this process.

First, I would like to thank my adviser Dr. Geraldine Higgins, whose love for Irish literature and endless knowledge about Ireland has been both inspiring and invaluable to my research and writing. To Dr. Ladd and Dr. Yannakakis, you are among the most memorable professors I've had at Emory and I am thankful to have you both as members of my committee. Thank you all for your time and encouragement both as I wrote my thesis and while I was a student in your classes.

To my friends, thank you for being there to make sure that I managed to have a little bit of fun during the past several months and for making sure that I had enough caffeine to make it until the end. Finally, I want to give the biggest thank you to my family—Mom, Dad, and Cody—who I can always count on for unwavering support and thoughtful advice. Thank you for everything you've done for me and I dedicate this thesis to you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Complicating Womanhood: Kate and Baba in <i>The Country Girls Trilogy</i>	
Constructing Womanhood.....	12
Inheriting Womanhood.....	13
The ‘Other’ Women.....	19
Becoming Wives.....	24
Investigating Female Sexuality.....	33
‘All Bitches:’ Women Perceiving Women.....	39
Chapter 2: Revisiting the Country Girls	43
Women’s Liberation Movement.....	44
Reconsidering Womanhood? O’Brien’s <i>Country Girls Epilogue</i>	47
Chapter 3: Positioning Edna O’Brien	54
Censored: The Indecency of Edna O’Brien.....	55
As They Saw Her: Popular Response to O’Brien.....	65
Breaking into the Literary Canon: O’Brien and 20th Century Women’s Writing.....	70
Conclusion	77
Bibliography	80

INTRODUCTION

Just a decade before the Women's Movement took off in the latter half of twentieth-century Ireland, Irish author Edna O'Brien published her first novel, *The Country Girls*. Since its publication in 1960, O'Brien has written and published over fifteen novels, several collections of short stories, plays, screenplays and poetry. Throughout her prolific career, O'Brien has been celebrated and denounced for her writing, both censored and anthologized in her home country. Along with her Irish heroines, she has become infamous for her forthright exposé of sexuality and female experience, which caused six of her early novels to be banned for "immoral" and "obscene" content. It is only in the past twenty years, three decades after the publication of *The Country Girls*, that Irish and international scholars recognize O'Brien as an exceptional writer of contemporary fiction, with *The Irish Times* citing her as "one of our bravest and best novelists" in 2001 (*A Pagan Place*, back cover). As early as 1985, however, Irish feminist and journalist Nuala O'Faolain recognized O'Brien as

the most important writer in modern Ireland by sole virtue of the fact that her books can be found on the revolving book-stand of any small-town Irish newsagent's shop. She is published, advertised and distributed. Not one other native woman writer is, in those respects, comparable. (O'Faolain 132)

Only decades before, however, readers in Ireland scathingly criticized her as "a smear on Irish womanhood" (Carlson 76).

Although in recent years O'Brien has earned her rightful place in the Irish canon of literature, she continues to be remembered predominantly for the scandal that erupted in Ireland with the publication of her early novels. Yet the Ireland of the 1960s that O'Brien so poignantly evokes is virtually unrecognizable to today's generation of Irish

students. By 1984, O'Brien herself conceded that young people in Ireland would be uninterested in her early books; acknowledging the rapid changes that occurred in Ireland during this period, she admits "If I went to a dance hall in Dublin now I would feel as alien as in a disco in Oklahoma" (Guppy, 1984). Even so, her early novels remain significant, both as works of art and as historical and sociological documents that chart the personal experiences of a generation of Irish women whose voices were otherwise unheard. O'Brien uniquely captures the lives of this generation, constrained by the repressive Irish patriarchal society of the first half of the twentieth century yet on the cusp of the women's movement that worked to render such a society obsolete.

After publishing *The Country Girls*, O'Brien wrote *The Lonely Girl* and *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, both hastily banned by the Irish censors. These three novels, written between 1960 and 1964 and later collected as *The Country Girls Trilogy*, follow two profoundly different heroines, Kate and Baba, from adolescence to adulthood. The first novel of the trilogy, *The Country Girls*, introduces naïve and romantic protagonist Kate Brady and her brazen and conniving friend, Baba, through their Irish childhood in a suffocating small town in the west of Ireland. O'Brien exposes the strict upbringing of their Catholic convent school, from which they are eventually expelled. From their home in County Clare, the pair moves to Dublin, searching for love and excitement, which find them fleetingly throughout *The Lonely Girl*. In the third book of the trilogy, ironically titled *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, both women find themselves married to the men they think will fulfill their desires, but both end up disappointed and unsatisfied with their husbands and their lives.

Controversy quickly followed the release of these novels in Ireland because for the first time, an Irish woman writer openly addressed the forbidden territory of women's subjectivity and personal experience. Female sexual desire, abortion, contraception, extramarital relationships and divorce emerged in O'Brien's novels as quintessential elements of women's experience, topics which had been hitherto unacknowledged in discussion and condemned by the Irish Catholic patriarchy. By depicting these issues as relevant to Irish women, O'Brien subverted and undermined their idealized visions of womanhood. Further, O'Brien created outrage in her home country because her novels harshly attacked the oppressive and repressive aspects of Irish society, namely the legal, physical and social abuses against women that originated in the deeply patriarchal ideologies circulated by Ireland's power structures during the twentieth century.

Implicit in this thesis is the idea that in the first half of the twentieth century and well into the second half, Irish society operated under a patriarchal system empowered by the Roman Catholic Church and the Irish state. Patriarchy, to use Sylvia Walby's definition, exists as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (Walby 5). Authority in Ireland was vested in exclusively male institutions – the national government and the equally influential Catholic Church. As the wielders of power in Irish society, men identified and constructed the norms by which women were expected to behave.

Irish patriarchal authority maintained that the ideal woman fulfilled the roles of wife and mother, meaning that she was self-sacrificing, submissive and devoid of sexual desire. Catholic attitudes towards female sexuality emphasized chastity and self-denial, with reproduction as the only legitimate sexual purpose. The Irish state reinforced similar

control over women's sexuality with legislation insisting on the primary role of women as reproductive caregivers, effectively institutionalizing women's role in the home.¹ By indoctrinating and legislating that women must be wives and mothers, espousing virtues of chastity and self-denial, the Irish patriarchy maintained dominance over women.

As the first Irish woman writer to challenge patriarchal ideals of womanhood, O'Brien remembers being labeled a traitor to her "own community by writing about their world. I showed two Irish girls full of yearnings and desires" (Carlson 76). In these novels, O'Brien's heroines attempt to reconcile social expectations of womanhood with their own personal desires. O'Brien reveals her motivations behind creating two heroines in *The Country Girls Trilogy*:

I decided to have two, one who would conform to both my own and my country's view of what an Irish woman should be and one who would undermine every piece of protocol and religion and hypocrisy that there was. ("Irish Heroines" 1986)

To O'Brien, Kate represents a conventional Irish woman and Baba serves as her rebellious opposite. Naïve and convinced that the only way to achieve happiness is through a relationship with a man, Kate ultimately succumbs to the perception that women must naturally become wives and mothers, roles which are forcibly taken away from her. Bitter and world-conscious Baba, on the other hand, puts herself first in an attempt to become wealthy and physically satisfied; yet like Kate, she cannot find happiness or fulfillment in marriage. Throughout the trilogy, O'Brien's heroines consistently fail to live up to the standards of womanhood expected of them by the Irish

¹ Eamonn de Valera's 1937 constitution stipulates that 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 within the home" (EV 46). This article has come under fire by feminists for legislating women's economic dependence on men and assuming that a women's desired and natural role is limited to motherhood.

patriarchy. Because her heroines failed to adhere to the roles that lay the foundations for social control in Ireland, O'Brien's early writing did much more than tell a story about young girls growing up—she openly challenged both the doctrine of the Irish Catholic Church as well as the authority of the state. With her frank discussion of female sexual desire, contraception, and critique of Irish repression of women, O'Brien threatened the structures that maintained social order in Ireland.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

The reception of O'Brien's work in Ireland varied significantly, with churchmen, civil officials, media outlets, academics, feminists and members of the public responding to the torrent of controversy surrounding the publication and censorship of her first novels. The diversity and intensity of the reactions to O'Brien indicates that the atmosphere in 1960's Ireland was hardly homogenous in its attitudes towards women and to the Irish authorities. Instead, fissures and divisions within Irish society are revealed in response to the contentious social issues that O'Brien brought to the forefront.

Virtually all of the essays and criticism on O'Brien published in the past decade begin with what seems to be a requisite acknowledgement of the dearth of academic interest in such an important and successful Irish author. While O'Brien has enjoyed commercial success worldwide, her status as an Irish writer has veered between recognition as an accepted popular writer of light fiction and a respected artist worthy of academic attention. Immediately after O'Brien published *The Country Girls*, a reviewer described it as “‘a lightsome story’ about ‘the romp of two wayward wenches’” (Bell,

1968). Even now, five decades since the publication of *The Country Girls*, critical attention to her work remains almost exclusively relegated to a small but influential group of literary critics and women's studies specialists.

As Iris Lindahl-Riattila perceptively summarizes, critics during the 1960s categorized O'Brien's early novels and short stories as one or several of the following: "badly disguised autobiography, pornography disguised as literature, fiction without a story, or fiction with only one story repeated again" (Lindahl-Riattila 74). Such criticisms followed O'Brien throughout the next two decades, creating reductive readings of her work that initially prevented her from achieving widespread recognition as a writer worthy of literary attention. For much of the sixties and seventies, critical analysis focused heavily on the autobiographical elements of her work, particularly in *The Country Girls Trilogy*, as Kate's trajectory from Irish upbringing in the west of Ireland to adolescent life in Dublin and marriage and divorce in London bears undeniable resemblance to O'Brien's own life. Peggy O'Brien's *The Silly and the Serious: An Assessment of Edna O'Brien* offers one such autobiographical reading, which mistakenly conflates Kate's narrative emotions with those of O'Brien. Eileen Morgan, one of O'Brien's most insightful and ardent critical supporters, references Peggy O'Brien's approach for analyzing *The Country Girls*—"to understand the author's psychology"—as a contributor to the misplaced focus readers have placed on O'Brien's personal history (Morgan).

O'Brien herself admits to the autobiographical influence in her work but defends herself against criticism by insisting that "whether a novel is autobiographical or not does not matter. What is important is the truth in it and the way that truth is expressed"

(Balzano 92). Her truthful representations of Irish country life and most significantly, her unprecedented expression of Irish women's experience deserve closer critical attention. Rebecca Pelan, one of a handful of literary critics who has written extensively on O'Brien, claims that "O'Brien created some of the most realistic, and thus brutal images of what life in rural Ireland was like for women during the 1940s, 50s, and 60s" (*Two Irelands* 105). Pelan, Eileen Morgan and Amanda Greenwood are among the prominent critics who have analyzed and congratulated O'Brien for artfully articulating the challenges faced by women in mid-century Irish society, particularly in their romantic and sexual relationships with men. Yet others found O'Brien's overarching themes of a repressive Ireland and cycles of love and loss exhausting; by 1972, Pauline Kael expressed frustration with O'Brien for her inability to "move outside the magic circle of women's emotional problems" (as quoted in Eckley 9). Similarly, Denis Donohue condemned her for her incessant critique of Ireland and, belittling her work in *The New York Review of Books*, writes that "Edna O'Brien, a famous and popular novelist, goes back to Ireland for a spell, a touch of nostalgia, a bit of grouching" (Woodward).

Alongside attempts to place O'Brien within Irish writing, critics have persistently worked to position her within the women's movement and Irish feminism in the second half of the twentieth century. As second-wave feminism took root in Ireland during the 1970s, many aligned O'Brien with the women's movement both for her willingness to bring women's experience to the forefront and because of her depiction of unsympathetic, often abusive male characters. Grace Eckley, the first to write a book-length study on O'Brien (only one has been written since), labels her a feminist in 1974 for her "realistic appraisal of the female condition and of the male-female relationship"

(Eckley 39). Eckley contends that this spurred criticism during the 1960's, asserting that "she has experienced a bad press in her native Ireland for a number of critical reasons: she writes about sex; she is a woman; worse, she is a feminist; she is a well-known personality; and her theme is love" (Eckley 23). And indeed, several critics found O'Brien's apparent connection with feminism detrimental to her work. While acknowledging the merit of her first two novels, Sean McMahon rebukes *Girls in Their Married Bliss* as "a kind of neo-feminist propaganda" in 1967 (Colletta 5).

As the women's movement grew and American feminism influenced its European counterparts, however, feminists largely rejected O'Brien's writing as antithetical to their cause (Morgan). Declan Kiberd writes that after the 1970's, the new "openly feminist, generation" became "somewhat critical of her fondness for 'wounded woman' stereotypes" (Kiberd 566). Feminists during this period found O'Brien's women to be weak, insufficient victims in their own lives. As Ann Owen Weekes writes, O'Brien's women created

An unhappy confluence, in that these longing, dependent heroines must have seemed counterproductive to Irish women struggling to express their own and their sisters' autonomy in the face of prejudice and tradition. In a period in which feminist scholars sought to counteract suppression and male definition by advancing their own sometimes idealized images of powerful women, O'Brien's characters were a source of discomfort. (Weekes 310)

In response to these critics who label her heroines as victims, O'Brien agrees that "they are not blithe spirits" but maintains that 'victim' is too simplified a term (*An Edna O'Brien Reader*, ix). Similarly, attempts to label O'Brien either as a feminist or not are too constraining; she recognizes that she is "not the darling of the feminists" but proudly recalls a reporter telling her that she "send[s] bulletins from battlefronts where other women do not go" (Guppy, 1984). By breaching taboos of propriety in both women's

writing and the discussion of forbidden women's issues, O'Brien created a space both in Irish literature and society for women to express and discuss their personal experiences.

Overwhelmingly, critics have exhibited a tendency to judge O'Brien's writing in terms of her accuracy in describing twentieth century Ireland. By treating *The Country Girls Trilogy* as the autobiography of O'Brien's life, however, reviewers have compromised her status as a talented fiction writer, ignoring the aesthetic qualities of her work in favor of a reading that retells the gritty and miserable details of the author's own experience. In many ways, O'Brien's writing is ahead of its time, anticipating the misery memoir trend in contemporary Irish literature brought about by authors like Frank McCourt, whose harrowing stories chronicle the miseries and cruelty of Irish childhood. Such readings of her novels as memoir are reinforced by Ernest Gebler, O'Brien's ex-husband and father of her children, who accuses her of "selling in print the private and very intimate details of their married life" (Letter from Ernest Gebler to O'Brien, 1964). Although the inclination to read her novels as 'true stories' has undermined aesthetic considerations of her work, O'Brien herself also encourages such readings and adopts James Joyce's maxim that "all fiction is fantasized autobiography" (*An Edna O'Brien Reader*, ix). By choosing to write fiction while defending it as true, O'Brien emerges as one of the most controversial figures in Irish writing. She critiques Irish society while remaining inextricably connected to it. As I intend to show, O'Brien is at once representative and anomalous; she envisions herself as a typical Irish woman but is the first female Irish writer to challenge the institutions that create the ideologies of Irish womanhood.

As I will argue here, the struggles faced by O'Brien's heroines reflect O'Brien's own difficulty in separating her perception of womanhood from the ideology she was conditioned to accept during her Irish upbringing. In the following sections, I will demonstrate the ways in which the figure of the woman, both in O'Brien's novels and in her own life, becomes the site of contestation between the acceptance of and resistance to the patriarchal norms that create a brutally repressive and male-dominated society. In the first chapter, "Complicating Womanhood: Kate and Baba in *The Country Girls Trilogy*," I will use a close textual analysis to illuminate the ways in which O'Brien works both within and against the ideologies of womanhood conceived by the patriarchal system. By locating her characters in 1960s Ireland, O'Brien provides a unique insight into the historical and sociological positions of women at this time. Following my close reading, I argue in "Revisiting the Country Girls" that O'Brien serves as a forerunner to the women's movement in Ireland, but that her decision to return to *The Country Girls Trilogy* by adding an Epilogue in 1986 reveals the instability of her position within Irish feminism as she simultaneously endorses and rejects the goals taken up by feminists throughout the 1970's.

Finally, in "Positioning Edna O'Brien" I use primary sources, including my findings in Emory University's O'Brien archive, to investigate the official and popular reactions to her work during the 1960s and 70s, revealing the varied responses of Irish society to her threatening of the masculine hegemony controlling Ireland. By examining the diverse reactions to O'Brien's work, I will elaborate the ways in which patriarchal authority sought to undermine O'Brien, yet also reveal the pervasive resistance to such authority even within Ireland. O'Brien's position in Irish society, like that of her female

characters, remains unstable; while her work exists as an act of resistance to the patriarchal structures that create the constraining ideology of womanhood, she also emerges as a product of the same ideology she critiques in her novels.

CHAPTER ONE

Complicating Womanhood: Kate and Baba in *The Country Girls Trilogy*

1.1 Constructing Womanhood

O'Brien's early work blurs the lines between reality and fiction. In looking at O'Brien's depictions of female identity in the *Country Girls Trilogy*—mother, daughter, wife, lover, etc.—I will argue that the instabilities of the genres of autobiography and fiction are reflected in the unstable characterizations of the two central characters.

Throughout the following sections, I will draw attention to parallels between the experiences of O'Brien's heroines and the author's own life, particularly in terms of her infamous marriage, the model for Kate and Eugene's relationship. I make use of autobiographical details not to suggest that O'Brien's fiction should be regarded as a mere reproduction of her life, but to underscore my contention that O'Brien herself is caught in between the competing ideologies of womanhood and resistance through which her heroines navigate in the trilogy.

In the section "Inheriting Womanhood," I will look at the mother's responsibility for passing down an example of womanhood and the ways in which the suffering of Baba and Kate's mothers influences their daughters to both reject and comply with patriarchal constructions of womanhood. Next, in "The 'Other' Women," I examine the phenomenon of O'Brien's heroines as the 'other woman' in subversive relationships with married men; I will argue that such a transgression also positions them as 'other' for their violation of the good woman trope of legitimate wife and mother. In "Becoming Wives," I contend that with marriage, O'Brien's heroines paradoxically find themselves in the dual role of transgressor and conformist, reflecting O'Brien's ideologically conflicted views about the

natural position of women as wives and mothers. The next section, “Investigating Female Sexuality” posits that sexual repression, particularly the denial of female desire, allows for the domination of women by patriarchal society. By broaching issues of sex, O’Brien normalizes female desire and sexuality. Finally, in “‘All Bitches:’ Women Perceiving Women,” I bring up the critically neglected issue of Kate and Baba’s negative perceptions of women; throughout the trilogy, both reveal deeply misogynistic attitudes towards their fellow women. Underlying the question of her heroines’ misogyny is that of O’Brien’s own views of women—to what extent does she share her heroines’ inherent distrust and dislike of women?

1.2 Inheriting Womanhood

“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” –Baba (CGT 421)

In her essay *In the Name of the Mother: Reading and Revision in Edna O’Brien’s Country Girls Trilogy and Epilogue*, Kristine Byron correctly contends that O’Brien’s “crucial theme is that of the Mother” (Byron 28). Although I agree that the figure of the mother is fundamental to O’Brien’s representation of women’s experience, as I argue here, O’Brien is less concerned with the person of the mother herself than with the legacy of the mother. In *The Country Girls*, Kate and Baba observe the suffering of their mothers and carry these impressions for the rest of their lives. While the patriarchal ideology of the Irish state and church bears much of the responsibility for constructing prescribed roles for women, it is Irish mothers who most directly influence their daughters’ perceptions of womanhood, both in Irish society and in O’Brien’s novels.

Ironically, the perpetuation of constricting roles for women lay largely in the hands of mothers, who, by enforcing particular norms of womanhood, acted as the foot soldiers of the Irish patriarchy. In other words, O'Brien shows how the inherited understandings of Irish womanhood both challenge patriarchy and are, at time, complicit in its structures.

In the first novel of the Trilogy, O'Brien proves acutely aware of the influence of Irish mothers on the socialization of their daughters as Kate and Baba's mothers each exhibit a distinct form of womanhood that becomes ingrained in their daughters' own personalities. Kate's Mama exemplifies the traditional Irish woman who relinquishes herself for her husband and children and Martha, Baba's mother, counters Mama's selflessness with her vanity and lack of interest in both her family and home. Although they represent opposing models of femininity and motherhood, Mama and Martha share a similar dissatisfaction with their lives and marriages and both implant in their daughters a desire to escape from a similar fate.

Early on in *The Country Girls*, Kate feels a strong connection with her mother and recognizes that her mother's life is entirely consumed by their relationship: She was the best mama in the world...I was everything in the world to her, everything" (CGT 6). As the wife of an abusive and alcoholic husband, Mama has little to live for besides her daughter and Kate grows up with the understanding that the choice of a mate is the determining factor in developing a happy or unhappy life as a woman. In the opening scene of *The Country Girls*, Kate describes her mother's routine distress as she spends her days and nights alternately fearing that her drunken husband will return home from a binge or that he will not. If he does not return, she could lose their home and be unable to support Kate or herself. Yet if he does come home, she knows he will become violent,

leaving her in constant fear for the lives of her and Kate.

Even as a child, Kate associates her mother's sadness with marriage to her father and as she leaves for school one morning, she observes Mama:

Like a sparrow in the snow, brown and anxious and lonesome. It was hard to think that she got married one sunny morning in a lace dress and a floppy buttercup hat, and that her eyes were moist with pleasure when now they were watery with tears. (*CGT* 9).

Kate connects her parents' marriage to her mother's sorrowful and lonely life. Because Kate's father remains absent for much of the time and spends their scarce income to fuel his alcoholism, Kate's mother and their single servant tend to their farm alone. Life for rural wives in Ireland during the twentieth century proved grueling and unrewarding: for them, marriage "brought a life of endless work and chores" and little satisfaction (Bradley, 260). Learning from Mama's unfortunate example, Kate wishes to escape rural Ireland and avoid the suffering she watches in her mother.

Mama, too, desires a better life for Kate and encourages her to search for alternatives to the lifestyle and marriage she could not escape: "She would have liked me to be a nun, it was better than marrying. Anything was, she thought" (*CGT* 67). Marriage for Mama offered few benefits—neither physical nor financial security came from her relationship with her husband, a man O'Brien characterizes in a later interview as the "archetypal Irishman." Like O'Brien's own father, Kate's Dada is "a gambler, a drinker, a man totally unequipped to be a husband or father" (Cahalan "Double Visions" 117). Yet instead of turning Kate away from marriage, Mama's experience leads her daughter on a search for a man who, unlike her 'Dada,' will care for her and save her from the life endured by her mother.

In addition to this wish to escape, however, Kate also inherits from her mother the

notions of conventional Irish womanhood that she struggles with throughout the trilogy. When Kate is barely a teenager, she learns that Mama died in a tragic boating accident and as she despairs, neighbors console Kate that her mother lived the life of “a lady, a true lady, and that everyone loved her” (*CGT*). Sacrificing her own happiness for husband, child and home, Mama embodied her society’s vision of ‘true’ womanhood. Despite her quest to find a hero of a husband, Kate later falls into a similar consuming obsession with her controlling husband and only child, leaving her just as alone and sorrowful as her mother.

Towards the end of *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, as Kate suffers a heart-wrenching separation from her unforgiving husband and young son, she angrily blames her mother for molding her into a woman who succumbs to an unhappy life and marriage. Pelan argues that to Kate, Mama becomes “the idealized mother figure” after her death, leaving an emotionally stunted Kate to spend “her life, searching in vain for a replacement” to her mother’s love (Pelan “Love Objects”, 74). Kate resents her mother’s unyielding reliance on her and recognizes that her mother transferred her own inadequacies onto Kate: “Now suddenly she saw that woman in a different light. A self-appointed martyr. A blackmailer. Stitching the cord back on. Smothering her one child in loathsome, sponge-soft, pamper love” (*CGT* 476-477). Unable to replace her dead mother’s love, Kate passes the same type of suffocating love onto her son, Cash. Here, O’Brien calls attention to the harmful cycle of ideological inheritance, in which one generation passes on its weaknesses to the next.

In sharp contrast to Mama and Kate are Martha and Baba, who lack the sacrificial and submissive nature required of ‘true’ Irish womanhood. Kate, accustomed to the

overpowering attachment and love of her own mother, finds Martha unmaternal and unaffectionate, noting “she was too beautiful and cold for that” (CGT 30). Martha leaves domestic duties to her maid and allows her children to be independent. Stripped of the nurturing and caretaking characteristics of Mama, Martha’s disinterest in family and domestic life labels her as an atypical Irish woman. With little regard to societal expectations of womanhood, “Martha was what the villagers called fast” (CGT 30). As a married woman and a mother of two, Martha resents her life as a housewife and looks elsewhere for excitement. She often visits bars and hotels alone, “dressed in a tight black suit with nothing under the jacket,” looking for the two things she wanted in life—“drink and admiration” (CGT 31). Baba mimics both her mother’s behavior and attitude in *The Lonely Girl* as she eschews all notions of propriety in an effort to attract wealthy men.

Conditioned to love money and attention, Baba grows up with a desperate wish to move from her hometown to an exciting city full of opportunities and adventure. Martha often confides in Baba that moving to a small village diminished her options as a woman. She tells Baba that she used to be a ballet dancer, but “she gave up her career for marriage, or so she said” (CGT 32). To her dismay, marriage, even to a successful veterinarian, could not satisfy Martha’s need for attention. Martha and her husband are often distant with one another and observing their behavior, Kate realizes that “Mr. Brennan had not found happiness, neither in his wife nor in his children. And the thought came to me that he would have liked Mama as his wife and me as his daughter” (CGT 110). Kate regards Martha’s vanity and selfishness, reflected in Baba, as undesirable traits in a woman. Instead, she perceives the self-sacrificial and submissive attributes of her mother as better served for marital satisfaction.

O'Brien's husband echoes the consequences of being brought up to understand female suffering as a result of parents' faulty relationships:

The lesson you learned in childhood from your own mothers' tight-closed face, that fathers and husbands are cruel and to be circumvented and used, has had much to do with the wreck of your own life. (Letter from Gebler, 1964)

He goes on to condemn O'Brien for passing on a similar father-hatred and suspicion to her own "mother-smothered" children, and tells her to "look in the mirror and ask yourself what you think you are doing to your own boys in relation to their father, and for what purpose." The issue of motherhood, then, is a personal one to O'Brien as she inherited a similar perception of women's suffering as Kate and Baba. Yet a crucial difference here is that O'Brien is accused of passing on her own mother-influenced woes to her children, both of whom are boys. As daughters, Kate and Baba are faced, unlike O'Brien's sons, with the possibility of becoming mothers just like their own, whose daily sufferings make an irreversible imprint on their daughters' perceptions of themselves as women.

Kate and Baba each inherit an idea of what it means to be a woman from their mothers. Noticeably, neither mother explicitly instructs their daughter to adhere to the accepted norms of marriage and motherhood, yet exposed to no other options, both Kate and Baba become wives and mothers like the women who influenced them. Despite their differences, Mama and Martha serve as examples of Irish womanhood and instill in their daughters an aversion to remaining in their enclosed community coupled with a desire to end up happier than their mothers. Even so, both daughters are crippled by the weaknesses of their mothers and convinced that the only way to improve their situation is through marriage to better, wealthier men than their fathers. Because they continue to see

their future in terms of their relationships with men, they remain bound to the same patriarchal ideology circulated in preceding generations which conflates the term ‘woman’ with the identities of wife and mother. So we might ask, how subversive is O’Brien’s message? Even though she indicates that mothers pass down a resistance to accepting norms of womanhood, O’Brien ends up placing her heroines in the same roles detested by their mothers.

1.3 The ‘Other’ Women

Having been conditioned to believe that a relationship with the right man could prevent them from sharing the woes of their mothers, Kate and Baba enter their adolescent and young adult years anxious to find their male saviors. Yet neither envision these men as their husbands, signifying a reluctance to accept the role of wife and an anxiety with the institution of marriage. In fact, both become involved with men who cannot possibly become their husbands—married men. Critics have largely neglected this trend in their discussions of O’Brien’s women, but it is in these early romantic relationships with married men that Kate and Baba inhabit perhaps their most transgressive positions within the trilogy. Although the heroines subvert traditional constructions of female identity, both are ultimately punished for their transgressions. O’Brien’s punishment of women who violate patriarchal norms suggests her uneasiness with accepting nonconventional roles for women in their relationships with men.

Women in twentieth century Ireland were entrusted with the responsibility of maintaining the morality, sanctity and stability of the family, which was constitutionally recognized by the state as “the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society,

and a moral institution.” Utterly disregarding the expectations of women to keep the family together, O’Brien’s protagonists do more to undermine the stability of the family than preserve it. Because the family acted as the basis of Irish society, such subversive behavior not only endangered the institution of the family, but also the foundations upon which Irish social order rested. As dangers to marriage and the family, Kate and Baba unwittingly threatened patriarchal control in their society.

As romantic and sexual partners to married men, Kate and Baba each become ‘the other woman’ in existing marriages; they also become ‘other’ in an additional way, as they fail to conform to the ‘natural’ roles for women. In Irish society, the idea of the natural woman as the good wife—submissive, maternal and moral—alienates those who resist such a model of womanhood. By falling outside of the good woman category, O’Brien’s heroines are implicitly understood as unnatural and deviant. Distinctions made between good women, who were legitimate wives and caring mothers, and their ‘bad’ counterparts have historically provided a model used in Ireland to advance misogynistic interests.

For example, during the recurring debates over the legalization of divorce and remarriage throughout late twentieth century Ireland, opponents of an amendment that would permit divorce accused young women involved with older, married men of maliciously breaking up the marriages of ‘good’ women. Instead of blaming the husband for his infidelity, they argued that men are naturally vulnerable and susceptible to female seduction. Men emerge as victims under this framework and attractive young women, on the other hand, are despised as predators who destroy families in order to gain wealth,

status, sex, or any number of apparent rewards. From this line of thinking arose the argument that “society should not endow, with the blessing of married respectability, a union based on the seduction of a weak man by an attractive and scheming ‘other woman’” (Bradley 286). The ‘other woman’ in the historical context of *The Country Girls Trilogy* emerges as a threatening figure; as ‘other women’, Kate and Baba are placed in a contentious position within their society and each ultimately faces the consequences of their transgressions.

Each one of Kate’s romantic relationships throughout the trilogy involves a married man, beginning at the age of fourteen when she falls in love with a man nicknamed Mr. Gentleman. Close to fifty years her senior and well-respected by the community, Mr. Gentleman initially limits his affair with Kate to clandestine kisses and secret drives in his car. As the first man to offer her affection, Kate confesses that “I loved him more than I would ever love a man again” (CGT 163). And yet she understands that, without the possibility of divorce in Ireland, he can never commit himself entirely to her. Although Kate rarely acknowledges Mr. Gentleman’s marriage, she experiences a momentary flash of guilt when he mentions his wife in passing, admitting:

I, too, was sorry for that tall, dark woman who lived so entirely to herself behind the tress and the white stone house. No one ever saw her except to get a glimpse of her when she knelt in the back seat of the chapel on Sundays. (CGT 97)

Kate recalls Mr. Gentleman’s wife as a stoic and devout woman who quite literally hides within the private sphere of her handsome home. Mrs. Gentleman clearly figures as the

‘good woman’ in this scenario, left alone as her husband turns his attention to a much younger, vivacious girl.

The destabilizing effects of Kate and Mr. Gentleman’s illicit relationship on the family unit are emphasized in their blurring of traditional family roles. Kate lightheartedly asks him “Are you my father?...because it was nice playing make-believe with Mr. Gentleman” (*CGT* 101). While sensually kissing her arms, “he promised that when I went to Dublin later on he would be a very attentive father” (*CGT* 101). Kate remembers “it was a happy time, and he often kissed my hand and said I was his freckle-faced daughter” (*CGT* 101). In these fantasies, both Kate and Mr. Gentleman distort their relation to one another, confusing lover with father and mistress with daughter. Their relationship is further distorted as their sexual intimacy increases. Mr. Gentleman begins to express his lust for his young girlfriend and before asking her to undress for him one night in Dublin, he tells her he “feels hungry...for all sorts of things” (*CGT* 161). Desperate to make love to her, he plans a covert excursion to Vienna so that they can have sex away from the prying eyes of people aware of his marriage. Fulfilling imagined roles of both sexual partner and innocent daughter, Kate disrupts conventional family structures and occupies an unstable position in her relationship to Mr. Gentleman.

At the end of *The Country Girls*, however, it becomes apparent that there is little room in Irish society for women who are not legitimate wives and mothers. When the time comes for Mr. Gentleman to take Kate away to Vienna, she anxiously waits at their appointed meeting place for hours until finally realizing that he is not coming. She returns to her lodgings to a telegram from Mr. Gentleman telling her “Everything gone

wrong. Threats from your father. My wife had another nervous breakdown. Regret enforced silence. Must not see you” (*CGT* 175). Heartbroken, Kate experiences the loneliness and pain of being the ‘other’ woman, a young girl who is neither wife nor child to Mr. Gentleman, but instead a threat to both of these accepted relationships. Abandoned by the first man she loves, Kate reaps the punishment of occupying a subversive role as a woman, which emphasizes the limitations on transgressive behavior in Irish society.

Baba, like Kate, becomes painfully aware that as the ‘other woman’ to a married man, her hold on such a relationship is precarious. During her affair with Tod Mead, Baba suspects she is pregnant and with nowhere else to turn, she goes to him for help. Instead of reacting with concern, however, he angrily forbids her from asking him for anything, telling her that he has his family to think about. Again, the stability of the rightful family takes greater importance over the well-being of the ‘other woman.’ Married men shift the responsibility for keeping their own families together to their lovers, who must remain silent and understand that when the extramarital relationships of married men pose a threat to their rightful and legal family, the affair is over.

Despite facing rejection as ‘other women,’ Kate and Baba continue to engage in relationships with married men while living in Dublin. While Kate’s motivations for seeking out married men are rooted in her search for love and finding her romantic hero, Baba’s agenda is much more practical. Kate explains her reasons for preferring older men, noting that older men are “so much nicer than young boys,” while Baba bluntly admits “young men have no bloody money” (*CGT* 119, 145). Their dissenting attitudes towards relationships with married men materialize when Baba sets up a double date with two much older married men. Kate becomes frantic and disgusted when her drunken date

tries to have sex with her underneath a portrait of his vacationing wife. Baba, on the other hand, unscrupulously follows her date to the bedroom, and emerges with pockets full of stolen food and household goods after he falls asleep. Neither take up their positions as other women out of an open desire to challenge accepted gender roles, but instead out of their fantasies of finding a man that can give them what they want. While O'Brien's heroines subvert Irish constructions of womanhood by partnering with married men, they remain trapped and punished by patriarchal ideology that positions them as 'other' for lacking the identity of wife and mother.

1.4 Becoming Wives

Two years after the end of her relationship with Mr. Gentleman, Kate meets Eugene Gaillard, the next married man who consumes her life and eventually becomes her husband. Kate continues her trend as the 'other woman' by dating Eugene; this time, however, Kate's love object is separated from his wife, an American actress who lives in California. Because Kate poses little threat to his already disintegrated family, the couple does not have to shroud their relationship with the same secrecy as if he lived with his wife. By becoming openly involved with a married man, however, Kate becomes even more of an objectionable woman and faces harsh condemnation from her community.

Kate first learns of Eugene's marriage from her boss at the grocery shop, who gossips about his estranged wife and comments "God only knew the number of innocent little girls whom he had started on the road to ruin" (*CGT* 212). As a separated man, Eugene is perceived as heretical and dangerous. An anonymous letter sent to her father counsels him to correct his daughter's rebellious and perilous behavior:

It is high time you knew about your daughter and the company she keeps. For over two months now she's having to do with a married man, who is not living with his wife...He shipped his wife to America, and the house is a blind to get young girls out there and dope them. Your daughter goes there alone. I hope I am not too late in warning you, as I would not like to see a nice Catholic Irish girl ruined by a dirty foreigner. (*CGT* 246)

Kate's father arrives in Dublin in a drunken fury to drag her home, where townspeople who have gotten wind of her relationship overtly avoid her. Immediately after returning home, her aunt sharply reminds her that "Divorce is worse than murder," a sentiment she had been taught since childhood (*CGT* 260). The parish priest pays Kate a visit and reinforces this sentiment, encouraging Kate to atone for her sins. Paradoxically, the man who ends one romantic relationship before beginning another is demonized for deceit, while Mr. Gentleman, who consciously betrayed his wife by hiding his indiscretions with Kate, is revered in his community.

Both humiliated and angered at being forced back home, Kate turns to Martha for support, but is disappointed to find out that she too disagrees with her involvement with a separated man. When Martha suggests that Kate remain with her father and take knitting classes, Kate responds furiously, saying "Stay at home! Who was going to be the first to say that I should enter a convent? Why did everybody hate a man they'd never met? All those unhappily married people wanted to be sure that I came home and had it happen to me?" (*CGT* 259). Rather than reform Kate from her sinful behavior, being brought home reinforces her belief that she needs a man to escape the limited options of religious life or unhappy marriage in her hometown. And instead of turning Kate from Eugene, the 'staring disapproval' of her family and townsmen only fuels her conviction that he is the one that can rescue her from a life of misery in rural Ireland.

Back in Dublin, Kate puts aside her anxiety about Eugene's wife and in willful rebellion to her family and community's expectations, continues her relationship with Eugene. Secluded from the judgment of the disapproving outside society, Kate blissfully recalls finding temporary happiness, noting "I cannot describe the sweetness of those nights, because I was happy and did not notice many things" (*CGT* 321). During this period, Kate deludes herself into believing that she has found the life she has been looking for. Her delusion is cut short, however, when the couple enters a local bar by Eugene's home, where they are quickly met with hateful scowls and whispers. As they leave the bar, they are followed by sneers of "pagans, pagans" (*CGT* 339). After this encounter, Kate fears walking around Dublin, scared that "people were going to accuse me of my sin in public" (*CGT* 314). Public censure reminds Kate that even if she momentarily forgets that her relationship is, by Irish standards, sacrilegious and forbidden, society does not.

Although Kate's reputation as a ruined woman stems from Eugene's status as a married man, it is Eugene who continually attempts to transform Kate into an acceptable model of womanhood. He seeks to mold her into the submissive and simple wife-mother image that he was unable to find in his first wife, Laura. Explaining his marriage, Eugene blames its failure on Laura's undesirable characteristics of stubbornness and autonomy, describing her as "A privileged girl, brought up to believe that she is special, changed an unsatisfactory husband as she might change her bath salts. She believes happiness is her right" (*CGT* 221). In contrast, Eugene describes Kate as "Irish and romantic and illogical," clearly preferring these traits over Laura's independent personality. Plainly sending a message to Kate that he values her subservience and charm over Laura's

strong-willed nature, Eugene reverses the ‘other’ woman trope by describing his wife as the unnatural or ‘other’ woman and Kate as the ‘good’ woman.

Eugene gradually molds Kate into his vision of the idyllic Irish woman, dictating everything from her physical appearance to her behavior in company. He insists that Kate adopt a domesticated and unassuming look, telling her “to make up more discreetly. He bought me paler powder and narrow black velvet ribbons for my hair and a pair of flat, laced shoes” (*CGT* 322). He lectures her that she must learn to control her emotions and be patient, hinting that “discipline and control were the virtues he most lauded” (*CGT* 344). Increasingly, Eugene exerts control over all aspects of Kate’s life and her identity becomes inextricably connected to her relationship with him. She plays the role of obedient wife, even before being married, and begins to feel that this is the natural role for women, thinking “women care mostly for themselves or for their children, who are extensions of themselves, or for their husbands, who fill their thoughts and bodies: as he filled mine. Though he was not my husband. (*CGT* 349). No longer the girl that challenged accepted norms of womanhood, Kate’s mind and body are consumed by Eugene as she conforms to the idealistic expectations he places on her.

For a short time, it appears as though Kate has found her hero and that Eugene has obtained his “simple, uncomplicated” girl. These fantasies soon fall apart, however, as Kate begins to resent Eugene’s domineering nature and Eugene comes to understand that his “Little Kate” is not the easygoing and simple girl he imagined. Kate bitterly summarizes the power relations between her and Eugene:

...he controlled, full of bile and intolerance, knowing everyone, knowing everything—me swayed and frightened by every wind, light-headed, mad in one eye (or so he said), bred in (as he said again) ‘Stone Age ignorance and religious savagery.’ (*CGT* 345)

Kate recognizes that she lets Eugene take advantage of her insecurities in order to control her, and she regrets his rigid constraint over her life. Yet Eugene finds that she must be tightly controlled to rein in her wild emotions and country manners, and loses his temper at her following a dinner party at which she sulked because he neglected to pay her attention. He ruthlessly insults her, snarling “You are incapable of thinking. Why don’t you get up and wash your face and put some powder on? *Do* something. Sink your inadequacy into washing walls or mending my socks or conquering your briary nature” (CGT 359). To Eugene, the solution to solving Kate’s dissatisfaction is to force her even further into domesticity, where Kate struggles with her desire to meet Eugene’s unrealistic expectations for her. Trying to reconcile her position as ‘other woman’ with Eugene’s idealistic illusion of her as a weakly submissive partner, Kate finds herself stuck in two seemingly opposing roles, that of the transgressor as well as the conformist.

Here, O’Brien negates any assumption that Kate and Eugene’s relationship will become any more successful or happy than those of the other couples in the novels, particularly those of Kate and Baba’s parents. Almost a century earlier, Jack Yeats defended J.M. Synge’s controversial play *In the Shadow of the Glen* as a depiction of “our national institution, the loveless marriage” (Yeats, 3). Decades later, it appears that little has improved for Irish marriages. Letters from Gebler bear out O’Brien’s own experience with what seems to be a cultural scourge on marriage. He blames the disintegration of their marriage on her refusal to be both a ‘good’ wife and an appropriate mother to their children. Attacking her for putting her career ahead of her family and for having friendships with other men, Gebler acts as a prototype for Eugene’s misogynistic attitudes and behaviors. He regretfully writes that he “gave up hope that

you would be the kind of wife who would help a husband to work as a writer” and claims that she only married him because he was a published author and she was looking for a way into the writing industry. O’Brien’s refusal to sacrifice her own career for her husband’s ultimately paid off, as she continues to write successfully whereas none of his work has remained in print after his death. Still, he undermined her at every opportunity, even writing “another Edna attempt at writing a novel” on an early draft of *Girls in Their Married Bliss*. Gebler’s vehement attacks on O’Brien as a wife and mother make it clear that in their marriage, like those of O’Brien’s heroines, neither partner could sustain the others’ happiness or manage their expectations.

In the opening of the last novel of *The Country Girls Trilogy*, Baba reveals she and Kate are both married, but have not achieved happiness in either their lives and marriages:

Not long ago Kate Brady and I were having a few gloomy gin fizzes up London, bemoaning the fact that nothing would ever improve, that we’d die the way we were--enough to eat, married, dissatisfied. (CGT 381)

“Enough to eat, married, dissatisfied,” the women find themselves hardly more fulfilled than their mothers before them. Recognizing that Eugene’s “little dictatorship demanded a woman like her—weak, apologetic, agreeable,” Kate temporarily sheds these characteristics and searches, again, for a man who will love her and treat her well (CGT 455). She never finds such a man and similarly, Baba’s search for a man to bring her excitement and sexual fulfillment yields no results. Such an ending reveals O’Brien’s rejection of Kate and Baba’s belief that a ‘right man’ will rescue these women from their sufferings as women, yet she offers no alternative solution to their dismal lives. During this stage in her life, which she admits was a difficult time due to her pending divorce,

O'Brien cannot advocate any type of redemption for women who fail to fully subscribe to patriarchal constructions of womanhood. Yet the comparative positions between Baba and Kate at the end of the novel suggest that the transgressive heroine, who consistently puts herself about her family, and not the conformist, who confuses her own identity with that of her husband and child, fares better in this bleak outlook on the lives of these two Irish women.

When Kate learns that Eugene is not the romantic hero she imagined, but instead a disagreeable and unforgiving man who "wanted her to stay indoors all the time and nurse his hemorrhoids," she discards her responsibilities as a loyal wife and begins an affair with yet another married man (*CGT* 387). Although the affair never becomes physical, Kate cherishes the secret dinners and love letters she shares with the new man, until guilt at betraying Eugene and her marriage overwhelms her, especially as her relationship with Eugene becomes forced and insincere. Overcome with remorse, she promises herself that she will end her affair with Duncan and that she will revive her efforts at being a model wife to Eugene:

She lay awake and planned a new, heroic role for herself. She would expiate all by sinking into domesticity. She would buy buttons, and spools of thread other than just black and white; she would scrape marrow from the bone and mix it with savory Marmite to out on their bread; she would put her lily hand down into sewerages and save him the trouble of lifting up the ooze and hairs and gray slime that resulted from their daily lives. (*CGT* 401)

The heroic role Kate envisions to save her marriage is to become nothing more than a servant to Eugene, marveling in household labor and satisfied with her role taking care of her husband and household. Further, she is willing to wholly debase herself in an act of contrite penance to her remorseless husband.

Before she follows through on her promise to reform, Eugene discovers her relationship with Duncan and confronts her for her betrayal, making it clear that he no longer wants anything to do with her. With her indiscretion, Eugene's image of his wife and of women are irreversibly ruined and he adopts a new view of womanhood: "*Now and then he thought all women could not possibly be bitches, but not for long, reality was always at hand*" (CGT 401). Eugene realizes that the idealization of the Irish woman is a constructed fallacy; yet he replaces his belief that women should be submissive, maternal, and caring with the conclusion that women are "bitches" and instinctively manipulative. In a letter he sends to Kate following their separation, he describes her as the antithesis of his, and Irish society's, vision of what a woman should be. Instead of being nurturing, selfless, and placid, he sees Kate as "vain, immoral, mean-minded, hardhearted, weak, self-destructive, unmaternal" (CGT 504). This cutting criticism is found almost verbatim in a nine-page letter written by Gebler in which he outlines each of O'Brien's minutest faults, blaming the failure of their marriage on her inability to live up the role of her appearance as the "tender-hearted, dewy-eyed. Madly generous, warm-hearted Irish girl." Instead, Gebler admonishes her, saying "Behind that mask your real nature operated: vain, totally without moral sense of any mind, ambitious, mean-meaning, hard-hearted. Self-destructive." O'Brien aligns her own suffering with Kate's and transfers onto her the same punishment she faced by turning out to be more than just a simple, charming Irish woman.

As Eugene ignores Kate's pleas that she will reform her bad behavior, Kate remarks "For the first time she felt some intimation of the enormity of his buried hatred for her, for women, for human follies" (CGT 407). Like Laura before her, Kate could not

possibly adhere to Eugene's impossible standards for women, no matter how much she loved him. With both Eugene and Kate failing to meet each other's expectations, O'Brien highlights the dangers and impossibilities created by the construction of artificial, idealized roles not only for women, but for men as well.

With the breakup of Kate's marriage, the roles of wife and mother are forcibly taken away from her and she struggles to find her own identity apart from her family. Initially, she refuses to believe in the finality of her separation from her husband and child and pleads for Eugene to forgive her. In a letter to Eugene, she takes the blame for their failed marriage:

I feel nothing but shame. Of course I did you wrong, but I did myself wrong, too. I have a screw loose, that screw which should let me know when I am on solid ground and stop me wading into a swamp. I do not know why I do bad things.
(CGT 447)

She accuses herself of being 'bad,' not just for her short-lived affair, but for all the ways she could not meet Eugene's strict standards. As Baba notes, Kate "said nothing about the years of emotional pummeling from him" but instead regards herself as a failure as a woman for being unable to adequately perform the roles of wife and mother (CGT 447). Kate almost effortlessly fluctuates between violating patriarchy and throwing herself at its mercy. Anatole Broyard condemns Kate for this quality in a derisive review of *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, arguing that "she makes no effort to struggle against her self-hatred, to oppose it in a way that would give her behavior tension and dignity. While she may be a victim, Kate is not a sympathetic figure" (Broyard, 1986). Correctly, he identifies Kate as a figure that invites both pity and criticism, but not sympathy.

Forced to move out of her home, Kate emerges from her relationship with Eugene virtually alone, which leads to the gradual deterioration of her mental health. Kate suffers

a series of psychiatric episodes after being separated from her husband, including an attack on a weighing scale in the middle of Waterloo station in which she gashes her wrists open and is sent to the hospital. Finally, without warning, Eugene takes their son, Cash, and departs for another country, taking along their former housekeeper as Cash's stand-in mother.² To Kate, this signifies the ultimate abandonment and betrayal and it renders her psychologically irreparable. Following their departure, Kate undergoes sterilization at a private doctor's office near her home in London. Baba visits her in the hospital, and Kate tells her that "at least I've eliminated the risk of making the same mistake again" (CGT 508). Haunted by Kate's words and her behavior, Baba sadly notices that her friend had become "someone of whom too much had been cut away, some important region that they both knew nothing about" (CGT 508). In removing her ability to reproduce, Kate symbolically rids herself of the very thing that serves as the foundation of women's identity. By the close of the novel, Kate has lost her grip on reality and on herself; Baba, in contrast, remains independent and strong, despite her unsatisfying and often difficult marriage.

1.5 Investigating Female Sexuality

In response to the tendency of reviewers and readers to attack her for writing novels entirely concerned about sex, O'Brien remarks: "in a story of 70,000 words 3000 at most might deal directly with sex; if these 3000 are pored over to the virtual exclusion of the other 67,000, whose fault is that?" (Eckley 14). She appropriately corrects critics

² It is significant to note that in the first edition of *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, O'Brien ended the novel on a slightly more optimistic note. Kate does not have herself sterilized, but instead she and Baba plan to escape London and live a life of freedom far away from their husbands.

like Bruce Arnold, who in 1966 called her portrayal of sexuality “exhibitionistic,” and others who have viewed the gratuitous presentation of sex to be O’Brien’s goal (*Irish Times* 21 Nov. 1966). Even in 1972, O’Brien was personally named in a state-sponsored report on the status of pornography in England as a “leading purveyor of insidiously pornographic and perverted views on sex” (“The Longford Report” 1972). While recognizing the dangers of relegating O’Brien’s novels to the realm of pornographic and vulgar fiction, readers would be remiss to entirely ignore the sexual aspects of her novels, as sex functions as a significant element of the female experience O’Brien so truthfully expresses. She candidly critiques the claustrophobic repression of female sexuality in Irish society by highlighting her heroines’ ignorance about sex and later, their rebellion against state and church control over their sexuality.

As Tom Inglis argues in *Origins and Legacies of Irish Prudery*, “One of the primary mechanisms of everyday policing [in Ireland] was the control of desire and pleasure, especially sexual desire and pleasure” (Inglis 11). Such regulation of female sexuality and encouragement of sexual denial emphasizes, according to Geraldine Meany, “the obsession of the Catholic church and the Irish state with controlling women’s bodies” (Inglis 29). During the 1960s and earlier, the Church hierarchy and the Irish state envisioned the ideal woman as a mother and consequently, female sexuality was viewed only in terms of procreation within marriage. The Church outspokenly forbade premarital sex, contraception, and most fervently, abortion; similarly, Irish legislation prohibited the use of contraceptives and abortion. Further, it restricted access to information about sex and sexual health for women, leaving them uninformed about their own bodies and in fear of violating laws controlling their bodies. It was not until

1979 that contraception became legal and even then, it only became available to married couples with a prescription. After several controversial referendums, divorce was finally legalized in 1995 but even today, abortion still remains illegal in Ireland. Throughout the trilogy, Kate and Baba violate all norms of sexuality emphasized by Ireland's controlling sexual regime by engaging in premarital and extramarital sex, attempting abortion and perhaps most dangerously, expressing their sexual desires and acting on their impulses for sexual pleasure. Even so, their limited sexual freedom becomes marred by pressures to comply to their society's strictly defined sexual roles.

From childhood, Kate learns to regard sex as a fear-inspiring but mysterious duty of womanhood. She "had been brought up to think of it as something unmentionable, which a woman had to pretend to like, to please a husband" (*CGT* 226). Her limited understanding of sex as an ordeal to be endured developed from her observations of her parents' sexual relationship. On the rare occasions when her father wished for his wife to sleep in his bedroom, Mama acted "reluctant and frightened as if something terrible were being done to her. She used to sleep with me as often as she could and only went across to his room when he made her" (*CGT* 50). Mama's fear of sex passed down to her daughter, who grew up believing that sex could be enjoyed only by men, and represented just another one of the unpleasant responsibilities of being a wife. Further, Church doctrine instilled in Kate a fear of sex as a mortal sin. When Eugene probes her to begin sleeping with him, Kate despairs that "I was going to do something terrible. I believed in hell, in eternal torment by fire (*CGT* 232). It is no surprise then, that she puts off having sex with Eugene for as long as possible, repeatedly telling him that she is too scared.

When Kate eventually gives in to Eugene, however, she intuitively connects sex with becoming a woman and perceives her own sexuality as an act of resistance against those who control her: “I thought of Baba and Martha and my aunt and all the people who regarded me as a child, and I knew that I had now passed—inescapably—into womanhood” (*CGT* 316). Underlying Kate’s conscious connection between sex and womanhood is the embedded woman-wife-mother perception of womanhood. Kate regards herself as “different...from every other girl I knew” but also feels connected to those women who have also had sex:

I wondered if Baba had experienced this, and if she had been afraid, or if she had liked it. I thought of Mama and of how she used to blow on hot soup before she gave it to me, and of the rubber bands she put inside the turndown of my ankle socks, to keep them from falling. (*CGT* 317)

Kate immediately associates her first sexual experience with a loving and tender image of her mother caring for her in an affectionate and maternal role. Even though her act of premarital sex transgresses traditional expected norms of Irish women, Kate instinctively accepts the connection between sex and motherhood as natural.

Eugene, too, promotes the link between sex and motherhood, telling Kate “I just want to give you nice babies” (*CGT* 317). Even though Kate becomes terrified at the thought of having children, Eugene repetitively makes her feel guilty for not being ready to be a mother and laments after sex at “all those little seeds we let go to waste” (*CGT* 350). Eugene’s frustration weighs on Kate, and fearing that he will leave her unless she becomes a mother, she “wished that I could have a baby in some easy, miraculous way” (*CGT* 350). After persuading Kate to shed her religious convictions to have sex with him outside of the context of marriage and reproduction, Eugene seeks to reposition Kate’s sexuality back into the context of motherhood and eventually, marriage. And in the

beginning of *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, Baba reveals that Eugene marries a heavily pregnant Kate, which signifies his success in molding Kate into both a wife and mother.

After marrying Frank Durack, a wealthy but ignorant Irish builder she meets in London, Baba also feels pressure in her sexual relationship to become a mother. A couple of years into their marriage, Frank embarrasses Baba by publicly announcing their inability to conceive, saying “Baba, you’ll have to go to a doctor and have yourself seen to” (CGT 410). Frank insists that Baba must have something wrong with her because she does not have children, reinforcing the idea that women in sexual relationships are perceived as abnormal or flawed if they are not reproducing. In the end, Frank proves to be the one incapable of conceiving, yet he unquestioningly blames his wife for their apparent sexual dysfunction.

In addition to having a childless marriage, Baba feels a lack of sexual desire towards her husband. Of Frank, Baba admits “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. Quite the opposite” (CGT 385). As she later indicates, her absence of sexual pleasure results more from Frank’s ignorance about sexuality than her lack of attraction to him. When Frank fails to please her in bed, he defensively asks what is wrong with her, again deflecting the responsibility for sexual problems onto his wife. Frustrated, she tells him “it wasn’t as simple as he thought, that for women hand manipulation, coaxing et cetera had to come into it. He said it made us sound like a bleeding motor engine” (CGT 410). Frank knows virtually nothing about women and Baba connects this to his upbringing, wondering “whether it was his mother, or indoctrination from those flogging Christian brothers, or had he been with sheep and chickens as a kid” that gave him his faulty

understanding of women (*CGT* 410). Because of the crippling lack of knowledge about female sexuality, sexual dissatisfaction comes to define Baba's relationships with men throughout *Girls in Their Married Bliss*. At the end of the novel, Baba summarizes the tragedy of women's sexuality:

I thought of all the woman who had it, and didn't even know when the big moment was, and others saying their Rosary with the beads held over the side of the bed, and others saying, 'Stop, stop, you dirty old dog,' and others yelling desperately to be jacked right up to their middles, and it often leading to nothing, and them getting up out of bed and riding a poor doorknob and kissing the wooden face of a door and urging with foul language, then crying, wiping the knob, and it all adding up to nothing either. (*CGT* 473)

Doubtlessly one of the most shocking passages of the trilogy, and almost certainly the most sexually explicit paragraph written by an Irish woman until this point, O'Brien calls attention to the disappointing realities of the Irish female sexual experience. Certainly for Baba, and to a lesser degree for Kate, sexual pleasure was difficult to come by and the mystery surrounding female sexuality sent women in an irresolvable cycle of desire and dissatisfaction.

Even when Baba seeks pleasure outside of marriage to fulfill her sexual desires, she is met with disappointment. In a brief rendezvous at her house while Frank is at work, Baba attempts to seduce a young drummer whose sexual inexperience leaves her unsatisfied and desperate. After the fleeting affair, Baba "felt awful...I was going to be saddled with all this guilt and I not having a bit of enjoyment out of exertion, only exertion" (*CGT* 431). Her guilt at cheating on her husband becomes compounded with a new remorse as she learns that her unfulfilling sexual encounter left her pregnant. After trying and failing to perform an at-home abortion, Kate forces Baba to tell Frank, who reacts with fury and threatens to kill her. When he considers the societal implications of

Baba's affair, however, he tells her to keep it a secret and promises to raise the child as his so as to avoid losing his business friendships with the local priests. Baba's sexual transgression ironically throws her into the role she had previously managed to avoid, that of the mother. In spite of both Baba and Kate's violations of the rigid sexual codes enforced by Irish society, both find themselves pulled back into its prescribed roles for women as wives and mothers. Just as her heroines were punished for transgressing as the 'other woman,' O'Brien punishes her heroines for their sexual transgressions. While advocating sexual openness and a reversal of the sexual ignorance propagated by the Catholic Church, she also offers a critique of her heroines' loose sexual morals, indicating her unwillingness to fully discard Irish ideals of female sexuality.

1.7 'All Bitches:' Women Perceiving Women

"When I'm able to talk I imagine that I won't be so alone, but maybe that too is an improbable dream" – Kate (*CGT* 377)

O'Brien artfully demonstrates the debilitating consequences of patriarchal control and influence on Kate and Baba, but she also hints at the existence of another, subtly veiled threat to Irish women that has gone unnoticed by critics of *The Country Girls Trilogy*. As I have argued above, O'Brien's heroines are at times complicit in accepting the roles constructed for them by the Irish Catholic patriarchy. But more than simply complying with patriarchal expectations, O'Brien's protagonists perpetuate the dominance of men over women in their society by their own distrust and even hatred of fellow women. Support structures between women are conspicuously absent; in their place are attitudes that pit women against one another and encourage male superiority.

Even Kate and Baba, friends from childhood, cannot depend on one another. As a young girl, Baba plays cruel tricks on Kate and makes a game out of humiliating her for her poverty and insecurities, often ridiculing her as a “right-looking eejit.” Kate learns to fear Baba, and although they refer to each other as best friends, they become involved in a rivalry that exceeds typical teenage peer competition. Neither seem to wish well for the other, and each become too involved in their own lives and problems to truly care about the other’s concerns. Kate learns to regard all girls as scheming and malicious, concluding “There are no innocent girls...They’re all scarlet girls like Baba, with guile in their eyes” (*CGT* 212). Even Baba expresses a similar misogynistic attitude, maintaining that “all wives were bitches,” a statement that is later replicated in Eugene’s statement that all women must be ‘bitches’ (*CGT* 237). The rivalry between women, emphasized in Kate and Baba’s competitive relationship, creates a latent dislike that leaves women incapable of trusting one another.

Such a self-defeating view strengthens patriarchal attitudes that justify the domination of women and insist on their inferiority. Kate herself reveals her uneasiness and regret at being a part of what she regards as a deeply flawed sex: “I hate being a woman. Vain and shallow and superficial. Tell a woman that you love her and she’ll ask you to write it down so that she can show it to her friends” (*CGT* 161). She feels compelled to apologize for being a woman, and Baba overhears her talking to Eugene after their separation “Telling him he should have met a good woman, but that there was no such thing. Letting the sex down with a bang” (*CGT* 421). By encouraging men to blame women for the failure of their relationships, Kate reinforces the idea that women’s subordination is both necessary and natural.

A disturbing consequence of women's alienation from one another is the prevalence of domestic violence, which is experienced by both Kate and Baba in their marriages. Historian Pat O'Connor estimates that between one in five and one in three Irish women in the 1990s experienced domestic abuse (Pat O'Connor 116). Yet issues of domestic violence were often buried by those involved "due to a reluctance to confront the myth of the idealized family where all is happiness, love and harmony" (quoted in O'Connor 116). Instead of being addressed, domestic violence remained a private concern that was accepted as commonplace.

When Kate mentions to Baba that Eugene hit her following her affair, she reacts nonchalantly and without sympathy. She considers the position of women, thinking "Millions of women getting hit every day, and I myself forced to strip once on the imprimatur of my husband because three of his pals bet I had no bellybutton" (CGT 408). Not only does she casually acknowledge widespread domestic violence, but she also admits to experiencing what appears to be sexual harassment at the hands of her husband. Yet she accepts this abuse as a part of married life: "An occasional blow from her husband gave to one or the other of those green eyes a permanent knowingness, as if at twenty-five she realized what life was all about" (CGT 390). Instead of creating a network of support with one another to resist such violent treatment, these women undermine each other's problems as unimportant, or as an inevitable component of being a woman.

The lack of female support and solidarity in *The Country Girls Trilogy* allows for patriarchal ideology to continue dominating the women that it separates by forcing them to depend only on the men in their lives. Similarly, O'Brien recognizes that her own

suspicious of women as “pretty savage towards one another” prevent her from developing close and meaningful relationships with her fellow women (Guppy, 1984). In an interview with Helen Thompson, she reveals “I am wary of women, especially calculating and controlling women” (Thompson 203). Admitting that she has few friends, either men or women, she does confess that “I value the friendship of a few women that I trust” (Thompson 203). O’Brien’s own conflicts with female friendships are reproduced in Baba and Kate’s relationship, which proves to be less of a relationship of compassion and more one of competition. By drawing attention to the problem of antagonism between women, O’Brien anticipates the efforts of the women’s movement to establish a collective resistance to combat the oppressive patriarchal social system in Ireland.

CHAPTER TWO

Revisiting the Country Girls

In an interview for *The Paris Review*, Shusha Guppy posits to O'Brien that her "success is, to a certain degree, due to the fact that your writing coincided with the rise of the feminist movement" (Guppy, 1984). While O'Brien resists any direct association with the movement, her writing undeniably struck a nerve about the position of women in twentieth century Ireland. Of the 1960s, the decade before the women's movement took off in Ireland, Ailbhe Smyth writes "if one had been a mite more sensitive, it would have been possible to recognize the anger that was mounting under the surface as the decade went on. It was female anger, subtle, veiled, but there" (Smyth 246). Such an undercurrent of anger materialized in O'Brien's early novels, which gave a voice to a generation of women who felt this looming resentment, but as yet, had little recourse to alleviate it.

O'Brien and her novels have an uneasy relationship with the feminist movement in Ireland. While she writes with the authority of fiction, she tends to be read as though she were writing fact. As I have shown, the protagonists of the *Country Girls Trilogy* move in and out of the autobiographical facts of O'Brien's own life as well as the lives of many women in 1960s Ireland. In the twenty-odd years after the publication of O'Brien's first three novels, Ireland underwent a rapid change, both in terms of its feminism and its belated modernization as part of the western world. It was after this transitional period that O'Brien revisited her country girls and reissued the novels about Kate and Baba as a

trilogy. This time, however, she included an Epilogue elaborating on the changes her heroines experienced two decades after she first introduced them in *The Country Girls*. In the following two sections, I aim to describe the changes made by the women's movement, especially in terms of the issues faced by O'Brien's heroines of the early 1960s, and then consider the effect of such social changes on the fate of these women.

2.1 Women's Liberation Movement

The women's movement in Ireland had its organizational beginnings in 1968 when ten women's organizations, including the Irish Countrywomen's Association and the Irish Housewives Association, joined to create an ad hoc committee to examine the legislative discrimination against women. Smyth argues that the formation of this committee "laid the groundwork" for the legislative reforms that induced change in the 1970's (Smyth 248). In 1969, Ireland's Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, ordered the establishment of a commission on the status of women, which published its findings in 1972 and made recommendations for law reforms. Chaired by Dr. Thekla Beere, the first female to act as secretary of a government department, the commission's recommendations focused heavily on economic rights for women. One recommendation claimed that women should receive payment for work performed within the home; while this suggestion was denied, other recommendations were made into law in the years following the report. Two such measures were the offering of maintenance payments for children to the mother, not the father, and the removal of a ban on married women employed in civil service positions.

While the Commission was largely reform-minded, as was the ad-hoc committee formed before it, its work towards women's rights was thrown into the background with

the emergence of the “IWLM,” the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement. A radical women’s rights group, the IWLM was founded by women frustrated by the gentle lobbying tactics of the commission. Unlike the women involved in the ad hoc committee and the Commission on the Status of Women, the IWLM staged public meetings and took it upon themselves to create media attention (Field Day Anthology: Irish women’s writing and traditions, 177). With seven prominent women journalists as founders, including June Levine, Nell McCafferty and Mary Maher, they succeeded in creating a media storm that left Ireland considering the IWLM as *the* women’s movement of the 1970s. Poet Eavan Boland was also one of the pioneering members of the group (Field Day 177). Unlike her fellow female writer, however, O’Brien regarded the movement with suspicion, saying “I sniff a certain dogmatism about the women’s liberation movement. And I sniff the wrong kind of anger. So much of it is based on aggression. And it’s therefore not a movement that I would espouse or take an active part in” (Shenker, 112).

In the beginning of 1971, the IWLM published a booklet entitled *Irish Women—Chains or Change?* which declared their demands for correcting the discriminations against women in Ireland. They called attention to issues such as equal pay, equal rights under the law, an end to the marriage bar and provisions for deserted wives and unmarried mothers. When invited to appear on Gay Byrne’s *Late Late Show* in March of 1971, members of the IWLM sought to calmly and moderately introduce their aims with the goal of raising awareness of their goals for women’s rights. Yet their debut became heated when a male Fine Gael legislator burst in to argue against their claims about discrimination against women by the state. The women on the show erupted into an

impassioned argument and created exactly the scene they had wished to avoid (Field Day 178). Soon after, on March 29th of 1971, the women entered a Church during Mass for the purpose of walking out during the priest's reading of Archbishop John Charles McQuaid's letter condemning the use of contraceptives. After this demonstration, they continued their protest by picketing outside of Archbishop McQuaid's home.

Following this protest, the women of the IWLM engineered the infamous 'contraceptive train' that transported contraceptives from Northern Ireland into the Republic. On May 22 of 1971, forty-seven women boarded a train to Belfast amidst a flurry of media coverage and attention. Collecting condoms, birth control pills, IUD's and diaphragms in Belfast, these women presented their contraband material to customs at Connolly station in Dublin, which was overtaken by a large crowd assembled to support and greet the women. Ultimately, such a controversial event alienated some members of the group who disagreed with such a radical move.

For the women involved in the IWLM, the unprecedented challenge to the laws regarding women's reproductive rights put them in direct opposition to the Catholic Church; a telling slogan of their movement was "Get your rosaries off our ovaries!" (Taylor 680). Now, they were faced with the choice between accepting either the devotional and patriarchal practices of the Church or feminism, but not both (Mac Curtain 208-209). It also marked the existence of fissures between the leftist women in the group and those who disagreed with their more radical aims, such as legalizing contraception. Such internal divisions ultimately led to the dissolution of the movement, which resulted in the formation of multiple, smaller women's rights groups of varying degrees of radicalism.

The women's movement became seen as an enemy of the Church, "waging war" on pivotal issues such as birth control, sexual education, premarital sex and pregnancy outside of marriage (MacCurtain). It was precisely these issues which, a decade before the formation of the IWLM, Edna O'Brien broached in her early novels. Yet as a solitary exiled woman writer, O'Brien made no explicit call for the activism that became evident in the later movements of the 1960s and early 70s.

2.2 O'Brien's Reconsideration of Irish Womanhood: *The Country Girls Epilogue*

In her consideration of O'Brien's addition of an epilogue to *The Country Girls Trilogy*, Kristine Byron asserts that it "seems to offer a definitive answer to this double plot, one which suggests that women's position has not changed drastically since 1960" (Byron 15). Kate is dead in a suspected suicide, drowning in a similar way as her mother—trapped in an inescapable cycle of love and loss. An unhappy Baba finds herself taking care of her husband after a stroke, unable to lead the glamorous life she always imagined and haunted by the death of her childhood friend. Why, two decades after the publication of the last installment of the trilogy, did O'Brien return to Kate and Baba's story?

In 1986, O'Brien published an article in *The New York Times* that sheds light on the seemingly desperate epilogue and suggests that maybe their dismal ending indicates a shift in expectations of women. She writes about how their story remained with her and the need to provide a supplement to *The Country Girls* twenty years later:

The characters remained with me as ghosts, but without the catharsis of death. I had never finished their story, I had left them suspended, thinking perhaps that they could stay young indefinitely or that their mistakes might be canceled out or they would achieve that much touted fallacy - a rebirth. ("Irish Heroines" 1986)

O'Brien's characters were left in a limbo throughout the late 1960s, during the 70s, and into the 80s. By 1986, O'Brien felt compelled to extend their story to middle aged adulthood. In considering her addition of the epilogue, O'Brien reveals "Coming back to them I knew that Baba's asperity had to prevail" ("Irish Heroines" 1986). The epilogue, in sharp contrast to the playful and naïve narration of the first novel by Kate, is narrated by a cynical—and largely unchanged—Baba.

Both *The Country Girls* and *The Lonely Girl* were narrated in Kate's first person voice, but when the pair moves to London by the beginning of the third novel, narration begins in Baba's voice and alternates between Baba and an omniscient narrator throughout the entire novel. As Kate became a wife and mother, she literally lost her subjective voice and narrative authority. Many readers, particularly in Ireland, regarded the narrative shift as an unwelcome change and disliked the replacement of Kate's lyrical and romantic voice with Baba's abrupt, cynical and realistic attitude. Such a shift, however, symbolizes the replacement of the romantic, sentimental Irish woman with that of the strong willed and contemptuous 'modern' woman.

With the epilogue, the substitution is complete as Baba becomes the sole narrator through which the reader learns that Kate is dead. This change, which emphasizes the transformative effects of the past two decades, challenges Byron's contention that nothing has truly changed since *Girls in Their Married Bliss*. After publishing the Epilogue, O'Brien writes that "Baba's voice is relevant to now, her assault on the world around her, the world of both men and women that she surveys with a scalding humor" ("Irish Heroines" 1984). At this stage of her life, Baba is more openly critical than ever and pays particular attention to the Catholic Church, which remains on her mind despite

living outside of Catholic Ireland for twenty years. Of Pope John Paul II, Baba grumbles:

He's still for keeping women in bondage, sexual bondage above all, as if they weren't fucked up enough with their own organs, and whoever said that all women in the world enjoy all the fucking they have to do--no one, certainly not me. The Pope is all for bevvies of children within wedlock, more children to fill the slums and the buses and smash telephone kiosks, because of course it's usually the ones in slums that breed so profusely, part of their routine, like a fry-up" (*CGT* 523).

The Catholic Church, as evidenced by Baba's reference to his speech in Ireland condemning birth control after Vatican II, had not changed its position since the last novel of the trilogy. What has changed, despite the Church's ongoing control of women's sexuality, is that the new generation of women is largely untouched by its influence, which only years before had been one of the most influential elements of Irish life. Tracy, Baba's daughter, having never been to Ireland, represents this generation of women with freedoms far removed from either Baba or Kate's childhood. Instead, Tracy has "No sentiment in her. She has oodles of friends. They all flock to her pad, and they drink Southern Comfort, eat chocolates, and discuss sex: how boring or unborning sex is. They're worldly as hell" (*CGT* 515). For the new generation, sex is openly talked about, women depend on one another and most importantly, they are independent and indulgent in seeking pleasure for themselves.

Yet the focus of the epilogue is not on Baba, but on Kate and her death. It cannot be ignored that both Kate and her mother died by water, yet each had differing levels of power and agency in their own deaths. In the first novel of the trilogy, Kate's mother dies tragically while Kate is in her early teens, an event that plagues Kate's memory throughout her entire life. While the details surrounding her death are vague, Kate is told that her mother drowned in "a little accident" while crossing a river in a boat with a man

from the village. Hickey, the Brady's farmhand, deduces that her mother was trying to escape her alcoholic and abusive husband (*CGT* 40). Kate also dies by drowning in an ambiguous 'accident,' yet her death is a suspected suicide. Kate's suicide and Mama's accidental drowning can be seen in terms of their respective power in escaping their oppressively patriarchal societies.

Mama had no control over her death, and she sank powerlessly into the Shannon, along with the boat and its owner. In contrast, the evidence surrounding Kate's death suggests that it was both predetermined and deliberate. Almost twenty years before her actual death, Kate contemplates suicide and thinks "If only she had the decency to kill herself. Water was the gentlest way to suicide" (*CGT* 447). To Kate, the ability to commit suicide by drowning was linked to "decency," or some type of positive characteristic that she did not possess. In the epilogue, Kate finally becomes capable of suicide and by killing herself, she too escapes "the fucking torment she was in," as Baba considers before Kate's funeral (*CGT* 524). This torment, like her mother's, was the result of her depression and oppression created by her experiences within a patriarchal society. To put a stop to this apparently unrelenting cycle of abuse, Kate ends her life. Mrs. Brady's attempt at escape was destroyed by conditions out of her control; conversely, Kate creates and successfully executes her own escape. Arguably, the decision to kill herself is the only truly autonomous act Kate performs throughout the entire trilogy.

Yet Kate's deliberate escape signals no victory for herself or for women twenty years after the beginning of the Irish feminist movement. Instead, Kate's death reveals that she was just as trapped and powerless as her mother, signifying that even decades of progress for women's rights failed to rehabilitate the damages inflicted by the passing

down of patriarchal expectations. In some ways, Kate's position at the end of the trilogy suggests that she ends up even worse off than her mother at the end of her life. The divergent reactions of society to the deaths of Mrs. Brady and Kate emphasizes that Kate found herself even more alone and depressed than Mama at the time of her tragic death—again, the absence of female support and solidarity emerges as an unresolved problem for O'Brien. Following Mrs. Brady's drowning, the entire town grieved, and Kate was told that "my mother was a lady, a true lady, and that everyone loved her" (*CGT* 42). In contrast, the circumstances surrounding Kate's death were kept quiet, and Baba remembers "the cow in the health farm was rabid about keeping it hush-hush" (*CGT* 524). It was a source of shame for those who were supposed to be looking after Kate's health, but also for her friends and family, none of whom were close to Kate when she died. For this reason, her drowning was called "death by accident" both publicly and privately by those involved, including the coroner (*CGT* 524). Whereas Mama is celebrated after her death, Kate is silenced. Although her drowning may have been an autonomous act, Kate's feeble agency is deemed inferior to her mother's degree of power in the societal reaction to their deaths.

Before her death, Baba remembers that Kate had again fallen for a married man and perpetuated the cycle that had trapped her in her depression, first with her obsessive relationship with Mr. Gentleman and then Eugene. Baba mocks Kate's newest interest, "This was the real thing, it was different from all the rest, he and she were meant, Tristan and Iseult, soul mates, etc" (*CGT* 527-528). This man, like the others, ultimately disappoints Kate and leaves her for his legitimate family:

She knew he'd gone home to wife and kiddies, put her in aspic, and wouldn't think about her till he was eighty or ninety and gaga, sans guilt, sans testicles,

sans everything. He'd given her some spiel about honor, duty, how they should have met before he went up the aisle. (*CGT* 528)

Kate continued her self-destructive behavior until the end, when she could no longer handle her failed relationships with men. She did not, like her mother, sustain her identity as the model of womanhood required of Irish society. Even while occasionally inhabiting the roles of wife and mother, Kate remains 'other' and the damaging consequences of such a categorization are apparent in her depression and death.

Thinking about Kate's suicide, Baba remarks "Death is death, whether it's by accident or design...Alone and covert as always, not knowing whether it was deliberate or whether she just wanted to put an end to the fucking torment she was in" (*CGT* 524). Here, Baba does not register a difference between death by accident, like Mrs. Brady's, and suicide. Further, she questions the distinction between deliberation and desperation. By doing so, she puts Kate's agency into contention because she suggests that Kate herself could hardly know whether or not she was actively taking a stance against the torment of her life or succumbing to it.

Even an act which demonstrates independence and agency is inextricably caught up in the idea of powerlessness in the context of Kate's disappointing life. She is powerless within her own society, dominated by the male tradition that oppresses her, and too weak to live within this patriarchy, she chooses to leave it forever and "bid adieu to the aureole of womanhood and all that" (*CGT* 524). Unable to live up to the glowing 'aureole' of idealized womanhood, Kate finds no reason to continue living. Baba, in recognition of Kate's surrender to patriarchal control, laments "Oh Kate, why did you let the bastards win...why buckle under their barbaric whims?" (*CGT* 513). In committing suicide, Kate's own lack of power is exposed, only remedied by a form of agency that

completely removes her from a society dominated by ‘barbaric bastards.’

In the same year that O’Brien’s epilogue was published, Mary Robinson, who would become Ireland’s first woman president in 1990, considers the position of women after the progress made by the women’s movement in the 1970s:

Whilst acknowledging the importance of the progress which has been made, it is necessary to pose a further question. Is it significant for women in Ireland in 1986 that men are still dominant as lawmakers, as members of the government, as judges, as senior civil servants, as law enforcers and as legal practitioners?”
(Robinson 102)

Robinson’s clear answer is yes, the women’s movement is far from finished in its goals to bring about women’s equality in Ireland. I would argue that O’Brien poses similar questions to the reader in her epilogue: while recognizing the societal changes since *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, is it significant that Kate is defeated by the same forces as her mother, that Baba remains unfulfilled in her marriage, and that sexual control is still enforced by the Catholic Church? Again, the answer is yes; but the ability of Baba and her daughter to survive, and even thrive, in spite of these difficulties demonstrates women’s facility for change, which generates hope for future Irish women.

CHAPTER THREE

Positioning Edna O'Brien

At the mid-twentieth century, attitudes of Irish church and state authorities towards women's reading and writing could be likened to those held by Victorian officials almost a century earlier, characterized by John Ruskin's caution to "Keep the modern magazine and novel out of your girl's way" (Ruskin 180). Victorian contemporaries voiced similar sentiments, citing both women's writing and reading as dangerous activities for females, whose purity and interest in domestic duties were at stake. A parallel reaction of fear occurred in 1960s Ireland as O'Brien's writing addressed hushed issues of sexuality, subversive women and wicked men. Shortly after *The Country Girls* was published, it was banned by the Censorship Board, denounced by academics, and condemned by the Catholic Church. As I suggested in the preceding chapters, O'Brien emerged in the 1960s as a transgressive writer—both because of her subject matter and because she is a woman—and as such, she inspired fear within the Irish masculine hegemony, which hastily and publicly labeled her as a dangerous and sex-obsessed writer. Ironically, the fearful and chaotic reaction of these powerful Irish institutions helped to instigate O'Brien's rise to fame or more accurately, notoriety, within Ireland.

Given the conservative nature and historical contexts of 1960s Ireland, it is not altogether surprising that O'Brien's early novels were marked as contraband and dismissed by literary critics. What is surprising, however, is that despite these attempts to consign O'Brien to obscurity, she became Ireland's best selling and most recognizable

female writer of the twentieth century. The scope of reactions to O'Brien and her work are testaments to her fame and infamy, and the vehement and passionate responses to her writing indicate that she hit a nerve in Irish society during the 1960s and into the 1970s. In the first section of this chapter, "Censored: The Indecency of Edna O'Brien," I aim to situate O'Brien within Ireland's aggressive tradition of censorship. Using newspaper sources from the period, I will demonstrate how she became as a pivotal figure in public debates over the Irish Censorship Board. In the following section, "As They Saw Her: Popular response to O'Brien's Early Novels," I use my research from Emory University's Edna O'Brien collections to suggest that popular opinions of O'Brien were anything but fixed; instead, the broad range of reactions demonstrate that the influence of patriarchal thinking became tenuous in the years following O'Brien's early novels. In the final section, "Breaking into the Literary Canon: O'Brien and Twentieth Century Irish Women's Writing," I argue that despite the difficulty of entering Ireland's male-dominated literary canon, as evidenced by the debates surrounding the Field Day Anthology publications, O'Brien played a critical role in opening up a space for women's writing as well as a new form of women's reading in Ireland.

3.1 Censored: The Indecency of Edna O'Brien

In 1960, Edna O'Brien joined the elite and infamous group of banned and exiled Irish writers populated by James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Liam O'Flaherty, John McGahern and Frank O'Connor. Donal O Drisceoil appropriately remarks that Ireland's list of banned writers "reads like a 'Who's Who' of Irish literature" (Drisceoil 148). Ireland's tradition of official censorship began in 1929 with the implementation of the

Censorship of Publications Act. The censorship legislation was reviewed and updated in 1946, with an amendment that reinforced the ‘indecent literature’ provisions responsible for the banning of O’Brien’s novels. To be considered indecent by the censorship bill, a work “shall be construed as including, suggestive of, or inciting to sexual immorality or unnatural vice or likely in any other similar way to corrupt or deprave” (Carlson 142). With such subjective grounds for censorship, the act essentially gave absolute discretion to members of a small board to decide the fate of a questionable book. The Censorship of Publications Act legislates that “the Board shall consist of five fit and proper persons” (Carlson 143). Like the definition of the term ‘indecent,’ the meaning of “fit and proper” is left ambiguous. In practice, however, the Board’s fit members were exclusively male and almost always involved either in religious or civic life.

In addition to holding the power to deem a work immoral, the Board was also entrusted with the responsibility of determining whether or not certain works were considered literature due to the clause that literary merit must be taken into consideration during the censorship process. Implicitly, a book that was judged immoral by the Board’s standards was deemed inconsequential in terms of literary value. For the Board, however, the fear of corruption or indecency superseded concerns for acknowledging works of literature. The famous words of Ireland’s Minister for Justice in the late 1920’s capture the attitudes of the Board towards books being questioned:

There are books which are so blatantly indecent and known to be indecent that it would be unnecessary for the members of the Board to read every line of them. Should the members of the Board, for instance, be compelled to read through every line of *Ulysses*, a book that has been universally condemned? (Carlson 144)

In the minds of the censors, no book which violated their own perceptions of morality could possibly possess literary value, so dubious books were often assessed without even

having been read by their adjudicators. Banning books because of single words such as “navel” or “shift,” the Board rejected serious novels written by both foreign and Irish writers, which Irish writer Frank O’Connor suggests is “insulting to the Irish intelligence” and creates a population that “knows nothing of its own country, or its own literature” (Carlson 151, 156).

By denying banned authors literary status, censorship both humiliated and ostracized Irish writers in their native communities. Julia Carlson, who examines the effects of Irish censorship in *Banned in Ireland*, contends that “the most serious consequence of censorship for Irish writers has been to undermine their influence in the community” (Carlson 2). By attacking the intellectual achievements of its writers, Carlson argues, Ireland’s system of censorship encourages ignorance and cultural isolationism. After its heyday in the early 1960s, authorial disputes with the Board’s decisions resulted in the establishment of an Appeal Board as part of the limited reforms enacted by the Censorship of Publications Act in 1967. These reforms, while giving writers a new avenue to regain control of their influence in the community, made little difference, as only the banned author or a book’s publisher could appeal the decision to ban a book. Even after the introduction of the Appeal Board, books with a perceived threat to morality—including, but not limited to, works mentioning contraception, homosexuality and sex—continued to be vigorously banned in Ireland.

Like many of her literary predecessors, O’Brien felt the consequences of writing a novel attacked as indecent by the Irish censors. In fact, her first six novels were each promptly banned after their being printed by London publishers—no Irish publisher would have agreed to print her novels. In her interview with Julia Carlson, O’Brien

blames the influence of the Catholic Church and the “blind adherence” of its followers for the intolerance of the Censorship Board and its supporters (Carlson 77). She tells Carlson “Irish [censorship] has always been religious. Sex is the factor here. The fear would be that the people would become libidinous, rampant” (Carlson 79). Fear of sexual knowledge and access to information about birth control and abortion fueled the Church’s and the Censorship Board’s rejection of books like O’Brien’s.

Liam O’Flaherty, the first Irish author to be banned under the Censorship Act of 1929, also found fault with the Catholic Church for encouraging Ireland’s debilitating censorship laws. He passionately attacked the tyrannical Church hierarchy for their condemnation of “sexually explicit” material:

The souted bullies of the Lord, fortified in their dung-encrusted towns, hurl the accusation of sexual indecency at any book that might plant the desire for civilization in the breasts of their wretched victims. (O’Flaherty, Carlson 141)

O’Flaherty regards the Irish people as victims of the authority that imposes ignorance upon them, keeping Irish society stagnant, poor and uncivilized. He also reveals that an “eminent London publisher” confessed that he receives “bundles of letters from sexually starved Irish women, asking for bawdy books” (Carlson 141). O’Flaherty’s experience exposes an undercurrent of rebellion from Irish women, even in the form of desperate letters to a foreign publisher. Another banned but now celebrated Irish author, George Bernard Shaw, recognized the detrimental effects of censorship on women and their sexual health. In a written protest against censorship in 1926, Shaw pinpoints the medieval irrationality of the Irish response to works discussing sexuality:

...but when it is proposed to allow a young woman to read a book which treats sexual abnormalities as misfortunes to be pitied instead of horrors to be screamed at and stoned at, an Irishman...madly declares that he is prepared in the interests

of family life to slay his children rather than see them free to read such a work. (Carlson 137)

Even thirty years after Shaw wrote this criticism, the censors held the same anxieties about exposing women to potentially dangerous information about sex.

In addition to the formal censorship of the Board, O'Brien also recalls a harsh form of unofficial censorship in her home country due to the influence of the Censorship Board and its supporters, particularly the Catholic Church. Not only did her status as an immoral writer preclude her books from being sold in her home country, but it implicitly labeled her as an immoral woman. Both O'Brien and her novels were treated harshly in her home town in Tuamgraney, County Clare, a rural village in the west of Ireland. After *The Country Girls* was banned, O'Brien's initial feelings were of mortification and shame: "My own family, my mother and father, God rest them, were appalled. Everyone in the village was" (Carlson 72). Instead of congratulating O'Brien for publishing her first novels, she remembers that her family and townsmen were ashamed of her. Following the publication of *The Lonely Girl*, O'Brien recalls an Irish woman who, after reading the novel, "got terribly ill and felt she was possessed by the devil, and the priest had to come to her house" (Carlson 72). Additionally, she claims that her local priest gathered up copies of the novel and burned them publicly on chapel grounds.

Despite the unofficial and official censorship O'Brien faced after publishing *The Country Girls*, she continued to write and publish novels without apologizing for offending Irish tastes. Her refusal to stop writing served as an inherent protest against the oppressive system of censorship in 1960s Ireland. As O'Brien tells Carlson, the act of writing by a woman, especially in writing about women, is a rebellion in itself. By

publishing novels with unapologetic and truthful representations of women and their lives, she boldly challenged censorship and the fear it fostered within Ireland.

As she continued to write, O'Brien became somewhat of a sacrificial lamb for anti-censorship protestors, exacting compassion from fellow writers and fans who found censorship of her novels to be unjustified. O'Brien herself contributed to such a reaction by speaking about her hometown and about Ireland as universally opposed to her, lamenting that "I've had a very unfair time. And I'm not saying that out of brutishness. In fact, I'm furious. I have never been given what my writing is" (Interview with Sandra Pearce, Manuscript, Archives and Rare Books Library). In interviews, O'Brien consistently depicts herself as a victim of Ireland's oppressive literary tradition. While she was undeniably treated harshly, she rarely mentions that she did, in fact, have ardent supporters within Ireland. O'Brien scholars, too, often ignore this aspect of her reception during the 1960s and 70s.

This period saw incensed protests against censorship, indicating that Ireland was not, as O'Brien suggested, a homogenous body opposed to the literature she and her later contemporaries were writing. Instead, as Frank O'Connor asserted in a speech to Trinity College's Historical Society in 1962, Irish censorship "is not censorship of indecent literature, [it] is a censorship of opinion and a censorship exercised on behalf of one creed" (Carlson 154). The creed O'Connor points to is that of the conservative Irish state and its partner in social control, the Catholic Church. And while Edna O'Brien's remarks about her reception in Ireland imply that she was overwhelmingly condemned for her work, archived Irish newspaper articles from the period reveal that people around Ireland spoke out against what they saw as unjust censorship of her early novels.

The Munster Express, a widely circulated newspaper in the west of Ireland, published articles favoring O'Brien throughout the 1960s and often expressed pride at her achievements. Munster, the southwest province of Ireland, is home to many of the rural areas criticized by O'Brien, including her home village of Tuamgraney, which served as the model for the town in which Kate and Baba grew up. Following the publication of her first three novels, an unnamed reviewer in this newspaper reported that "Edna O'Brien is doing a real service by her books. Let us hope that many copies find their way somehow into this country" (*Munster Express*, Nov 5, 1965 p. 5). Another Munster newspaper, *Kerryman*, voices an opposing opinion: "Now Miss O'Brien is not as naïve as she pretends to be. Her novels are banned by our Censorship of Publications Board, which today makes few mistakes when it comes to dealing with obscenity and indecency in print" ("A drunken, feckless, and inefficient people," *Kerryman*, Feb. 5, 1966, p. 12). As evidenced by these two opposing opinions printed within four months of each other in the same province, Edna O'Brien became a central figure for contestation in the debate over censorship in Ireland.

Throughout the mid to late sixties, columnist Proinsias Mac 'Aonghusa of the *Munster Express* praises O'Brien and defends her as an example of Ireland's unreasonable censorship laws. Immediately after *Girls in Their Married Bliss* joined O'Brien's previous novels on the banned book list, he expressed outrage about this slight to a writer "well on the way to being among the greatest writers to have come out of Ireland." In the same editorial, he attacked the Censorship Board, writing:

But the gents who decide what is good for us to read have decided that Edna's 'Girl's [sic] in Their Married Bliss' is too naughty for Irishmen. God help us! How much more of this foolishness will be tolerated in Ireland? (*Munster Express*, Dec 23, 1964, p 5)

Here, O'Brien's work provokes passionate dissent against the Irish censorship laws and her works become employed as part of a protest against Ireland's lack of appreciation of its own writers. Acknowledging Ireland's tradition of banning talented writers, he sardonically remarks that "Edna O'Brien has the consolation of knowing that she is on one of the most distinguished literary lists in the world in having her books banned here" (*Munster Express*, Oct. 16, 1964 p.3).

Even in Tuamgraney and its surrounding villages, where O'Brien recalls public burnings of her novels, she received positive press. In 1959, before she finished writing her first novel, the *Nenagh Guardian* calls her a "brilliant daughter of an extensive East Clare farmer" (*Nenagh Guardian*, July 35, 1959, p 7). Such pride reoccurs a decade later, even after the supposedly horrified reactions of her town, when she returned in 1969 as the featured guest speaker for the Scarriff Drama Festival. Her appearance created headlines in local newspapers and the *Nenagh Guardian* reported that the audience, filled to capacity, "accorded her a warm and enthusiastic welcome" (*Nenagh Guardian*, April 5, 1969, p 7). The article mentions nothing of her status as a banned writer, yet proudly congratulates her for her literary achievements.

Not only did reporters and writers provide public support for O'Brien during the tumultuous sixties when she was banned, but readers also expressed their appreciation and admiration of her writing. In a 1966 letter to the editor of *The Irish Times*, a male reader defends her against detractors and writes that "Edna O'Brien is truthful to a frightening degree in much of what she says...Our Island of Saints and Sinners (thank God) needs more Edna O'Briens to awaken somehow the world outside" (*The Irish Times*, Nov 16, 1966, p. 9). Similar letters appear in multiple newspapers across the

island, a majority of which were written by men. Women also express their support of O'Brien, like a Cork woman who wrote to the *Irish Farmer's Journal* agreeing with Edna O'Brien's television statement that the Irish need to be more honest and forthright. Yet, unlike the majority of male writers who agree with O'Brien, this woman does not reference censorship as detrimental to Irish society but instead acknowledges the duty of clergy and parents "who are trying to protect youth from the filth that abounds in the world to-day" (*Irish Farmer's Journal*, Dec. 17, 1966, p. 23). Although she writes from a woman's perspective about women's experiences growing up in Ireland, it is men who most often go to the trouble of publicly expressing their support of O'Brien, which complicates her claim that Irish men rejected her for failing to uphold 'the pedestal image' of Irish womanhood (Carlson 76).

Even more surprising than men's open support of O'Brien and perhaps the most unexpected media coverage of O'Brien comes from a 1966 *Irish Times* article in which a Limerick priest praises her and her writing. Invited to St. Patrick's College in Maynooth to participate in a question and answer session, Edna O'Brien found herself sitting with Father Peter Connolly, an English professor, in front of "an audience that seemed to include half the population of Munster." As a confirmation of both her popularity and notoriety within Ireland, even at a time when her books remained banned, the article reports that "the hall was full to overflowing half an hour before the time the meeting was due to start" and the packed audience "squatted on the floor and they made it almost impossible to breathe." While some audience members who had managed to gain access to her novels spoke to their vulgarity, others called them "marvellous;" the disputes over her work erupted into an "emotional atmosphere [which] became at times almost as

vibrant at the physical one.” Yet the most surprising response came from Father Connolly himself, who celebrated O’Brien’s first two novels. While he expressed disappointment that her third novel of the trilogy departed from her previously lighthearted humor, he declared his respect for her writing, which he appraised “solid, substantial and serious” (*The Irish Times*, April 23, 1966). Although Father Connolly did not convey complete approval of O’Brien’s subject matter, his public admiration for her as a writer proves that even the Church, O’Brien’s most formidable enemy within Ireland, did not present a monolithic condemnation of her work.

With the publication of O’Brien’s fifth book, *Casualties of Peace*, in 1966, prominent newspapers throughout Ireland—including the *Irish Times*, *Irish Independent* and *Munster Express*—closely followed the decision process of Irish Censorship Board as it considered whether or not to ban the book. Mary Holland of *The Irish Times* named *Casualties* her Book of the Day in November 1966, and she expressed her “hope that this book could be read by Irish women, and their men, and those who care for their spiritual well-being.” She praised O’Brien for her astute rendering of the “the dark side of Irish Catholicism, the darting, furtive guilt about sex which begins at our first convent kindergarten and maims us for too many years afterwards” (*The Irish Times*, Nov. 5, 1966, p. 7). Yet to the dismay of reporters and writers in Ireland’s largest media outlets, O’Brien’s portrayal of this side of Irish life led to the Censorship Board’s decision to ban the novel for reasons of indecency. Following this decision, members of the press from each of these news outlets openly expressed dissatisfaction at the verdict.

Factions of O’Brien’s perceived adversaries—Irish men, the Catholic Church, and her own townspeople—expressed brave support of O’Brien during a contentious time

when her novels were associated with immorality and sexual corruption. Although she undoubtedly faced ridicule and alienation in many ways as a censored author, she was certainly not unanimously denounced within Ireland. The existence and even prevalence of positive press about O'Brien and her early novels indicates that she received a much more positive reception in her home country than she lets on in interviews. In fact, O'Brien's writing gave some Irish people cause to oppose the oppressive censorship operating in Ireland. By doing this, they, like O'Brien, offered an implicit challenge to the patriarchal structures like the Censorship Board that sought to control all aspects of women's lives, including the books they read.

3.2 As They Saw Her: Popular Response to O'Brien's Early Novels

O'Brien's novels were forbidden for popular consumption within Ireland and denied credibility by the Irish literary establishment during the decades after she first began publishing, yet thousands of people felt compelled to write personally to O'Brien and voice their own personal opinions about her work. That such efforts at marginalizing O'Brien instead turned her into Ireland's most famously controversial woman writer speaks to the novelty of O'Brien's position within Irish society and Irish literary history. The boxes of letters handed over by O'Brien to Emory University reveal what book reviews and scholarly articles do not: the personal responses of Irish people to O'Brien's writing during the time in which she wrote. In the letters that O'Brien kept from the 1960s and 1970s, most of those from strangers can be loosely grouped into one of three categories—condemnatory letters, fan letters and finally, letters from male admirers. The large volume and surprising diversity of these letters cannot, of course, be easily defined

by such limited categorizations and by no means do all of her letters fit into one of these classifications. By examining her letters in these groupings, however, it is valuable to identify common threads in order to understand the ways in which Irish people perceived both O'Brien and themselves during the period in which she wrote her early novels.

The passion with which letter writers in the first category attacked O'Brien personally for her impious writing demonstrates the degree to which religious and patriarchal ideologies were embedded in the minds of many Irish people. As a testament to the angry fervor exhibited in these letters, Gennaro Carpenter wrote to O'Brien in 1966 that "you are just about the most uncivilized person I have ever met in my life...As a woman, you are nothing, as a person, you are nothing, you are unhuman and uncivilized; as a writer you are immoral, because your books are banned" (Letter from Gennaro Carpenter to Edna O'Brien, Manuscript, Archive and Rare Book Library). Although we have no indication of whether or not Gennaro ever met O'Brien, his vicious attack of her person suggests that her true offense, in his eyes, was her betrayal of womanhood by acting 'uncivilized' and 'immoral.'

Such attitudes, while less startling in the early 1960s and even into the 1970s, remained volatile even as late as 1979, when D. O'Brien sent a disparaging letter to O'Brien which read:

I wonder you are not ashamed to have written so much. I am simply disgusted that an Irish woman (a lapsed Catholic I conclude) could write it. Tho my name is also O'Brien I'm glad to say that I'm no relation of yours. You must have many enemies in Ireland as no doubt all your books are just as filthy. I only hope you will have time to repent before you are called to meet your maker. (Letter from D. O'Brien to Edna O'Brien, Manuscript, Archive and Rare Book Library)

D. O'Brien, and he was certainly not alone, found O'Brien's writing and heresy to be so severe that he took the time to write her a reproachful letter and admonition to mend her

ways. He attacked her on grounds of violating both Catholicism as well as Irish womanhood, two concerns similarly voiced by early critics of her novels. An equally vehement letter from an anonymous woman directly addresses O'Brien's sinfulness and the obligatory punishment she will face for her blatant discussion of sex:

Bed presents no difficulty: unfortunately the founders of your Church did not die between the sheets...refusal to conform to the will of his father would have resulted in Hell for all (not the Dogma, the actuality, in all its agony-inducing penetration and its unending...duration. Hope latter sentence doesn't 'sound' too Irish, Lady O'Brien!). (Letter from anonymous to Edna O'Brien, Manuscript, Archive and Rare Book Library)

Threatening O'Brien with the punishment of God, this woman's letter calls to mind O'Brien's descriptions of horrified reactions in her community to her apparent blasphemy. Like many Church and government officials, those writers who belong to this group of letters found O'Brien to be a depraved woman and an inept writer, which underlines O'Brien's standing as an alienated and transgressive author.

The next grouping of letters counters those in the previous group by praising and thanking O'Brien for her meaningful and relatable depictions of life in mid-twentieth century Ireland. Both men and women wrote these fan letters to O'Brien, oftentimes admitting that they had felt obliged to write to her personally after reading her life-changing writing. After reading *The Lonely Girl*, a woman named E. Flynn confessed to O'Brien that "I think most Irish feel like the girl in the book" and offered her thanks "for your help in that great imaginary world that we women find such consolation in to lift us from our drab lives" (Letter from E. Flynn to Edna O'Brien, Manuscript, Archive and Rare Book Library). A similar letter references "the struggle for truth which allows your unique talent to burgeon on paper—your gift of saying so lyrically what many of us thought we could or should but didn't" (Letter to Edna O'Brien, Manuscript, Archive and

Rare Book Library). These letters indicate the consolation felt by women who read O'Brien's novels and related to the difficulties faced by her heroines and by the particularly Irish contexts in which they lived. Men, too, found similar solace in the book and Robert Horner writes in 1966 "Pray, let me thank you for the pleasure that was mine as I read *The Lonely Girl* and *Girls in Their Married Bliss*...It brought me back to that time when I was a young man in Donegal, oh so long ago" (Letter from Robert Horner to Edna O'Brien, Manuscript, Archive and Rare Book Library). The experiences of Irish life illustrated by O'Brien resonated with men and women across Ireland, and the overwhelming number of fan letters she received stand as evidence to her popularity and to the fact that despite being banned and neglected by literary establishments, Irish people still felt compelled to read her work.

In the final group of letters, O'Brien is neither the object of derision or appreciation, but instead, the object of desire. A startling number of letters appear in O'Brien's collections that were written by men soliciting dates or revealing their passionate feelings towards O'Brien. These letters range from polite requests for signed pictures to utterly pornographic declarations of lust for O'Brien. Not surprisingly, most of the men at the latter end of the spectrum admit that they have never read any of her work, but found her television appearances and pictures alluring. In 1966, Norman Funston writes, relatively innocently, "as your devoted fan (at 40), not even having read one of your books, I claim the right to take you out to drink the next time you return to the 'black north'" (Letter from Norman Funston to Edna O'Brien, Manuscript, Archive and Rare Book Library). Another man, Don Heggie, writes to O'Brien in 1966 asking whether or not she received the flowers he sent from Nigeria; in the letter he included an

attempt at a love poem to O'Brien: "She's/So Fair/She takes the breath of men away/who gaze upon her unaware." Heggie ends his letter with a request for a date, pleading "if I could convince you that I'm not a complete scoundrel perhaps you'd have a meal with me one day in your favorite restaurant...you couldn't come to much harm and you must eat!" (Letter from Don Heggie to Edna O'Brien, Manuscript, Archive and Rare Book Library). Dozens of letters offer similar sentiments and requests for O'Brien to share a meal or meet for a drink. O'Brien, recognized as a charming and beautiful woman by almost all reporters and interviews who came into contact with her, caught the attention as well as the solicited and unsolicited attraction of men in Ireland and abroad despite her controversial position in terms of Irish womanhood and Catholicism.

Further, some men accepted as truth the accusations of O'Brien as a sex-crazed and lascivious writer and wrote to her under the impression that she sought sexual attention. Accused of being "a rather scatty woman who's always at parties and having love affairs" (Moir 37) yet also recognized as a classic Irish beauty, O'Brien intrigued Irish men like Beau Prestley, who wrote:

So I'm writing for you, not a fan letter really, I seem to have read too little of your work to be a fan, more a love letter to the E.O.B. in my head. Because physically, you are so...lusty...so much a woman. Pandora, perhaps, the gifts of all the gods...Because you are so sexy, so alive, so bright...So I write to you because you are so Celtic and magic. (Letter from Beau Prestley to Edna O'Brien, Manuscript, Archive and Rare Book Library)

Prestley acknowledges the two conflicting images of O'Brien, that of the Celtic goddess as well as the sexual temptress.³ Another man expresses his sexual desire for O'Brien,

³ For a detailed discussion of O'Brien's public persona, please see Rebecca Pelan's "Edna O'Brien's 'Stage-Irish' Persona: An 'Act' of Resistance."

telling her that her image on television always “turns me on.” He says “I don’t know what you’re [sic] heart is humanly like but as far as I’m concerned you’re everything that’s sex appeal means to me...I’d love to sleep with you” (Anonymous letter to Edna O’Brien, Manuscript, Archive and Rare Book Library). This letter, perhaps the most lustful of them all, continues for pages, describing the sexual fantasies of the letter writer to O’Brien. Another writer, a Brendan Lynch originally from County Clare, tells O’Brien that he did not contact her earlier for fear she might think he is a “cunning sex maniac—you’d probably have been right” (Letter from Brendan Lynch to Edna O’Brien, Manuscript, Archive and Rare Book Library).

In 1979, Trevor Silverwood took a different approach towards capturing O’Brien’s attention by describing in detail the profound effect her novels had on him, a self-described “savage mucky male chauvinist.” Yet his sexual desire overpowers him at the end of the letter as he admits that “I expect what I really want to do is lick between your toes and kiss the soles of your feet” (Letter from Trevor Silverwood to Edna O’Brien, Manuscript, Archive and Rare Book Library). As a writer who became connected with sexuality and the violation of female chastity, O’Brien inevitably held a publicly sexual identity and she became an object of desire for men, whose passion induced them to write to her in droves. Such a phenomenon perhaps reflects the willingness of many men to accept O’Brien’s openness about female sexuality, as expressed in her novels and interviews.

3.3 Breaking into the Literary Canon: Edna O’Brien and Twentieth-Century Women’s Writing

In addition to the issue of the “immoral” content of her novels, O’Brien suggests that she offended the censors simply because she was a woman. In her interview with Carlson, she discusses the difficulties faced by women writers in Ireland, acknowledging the domination of the Irish literary canon by men. She recalls “I was in my twenties, and I think they were shocked that a girl would have written a novel at all” (Carlson 71). As a young woman, O’Brien suggests that she was “supposed to be doing maternal, domestic, useful things; not things that are the provenance of a man” (Carlson 75). Instead, she was writing about women as she saw them—yearning, thinking and suffering human beings—which was initially rejected in Ireland in a controlled effort to stifle the identities of real women.

Because women’s writing like O’Brien’s provides a representation of female experience, instead of the male perspective that was considered universal, it was largely omitted in the establishment of literary canons. Feminist literary critics work towards an examination and dissolution of the patriarchal limitations imposed on literature, suggesting that a male perspective be removed as a criterion of literary significance (Tyson 84). By removing this exclusionary constraint on literature, feminists hope to bring women’s writing to the forefront, rediscovering previously neglected works of literature and admitting them to established literary canons.

A striking example of the debates over the exclusionary aspects of male-dominated literary canons occurred in Ireland during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In 1991, a group of acclaimed male literary critics published *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* amidst much excitement and anticipation from readers, writers, and critics. The purpose of the anthology, emphasized by the eminent Irish

writers and scholars that served as editors, was to “uncover writings not previously included in such collections” (Crowe 1). Seamus Deane, the general editor, explained in his preface that the purpose of the *Field Day Anthology* was to reclaim Irish writing from its marginal position in the British canon and to expose neglected Irish writing of merit; in doing so, many feminists agree, he participated in the same type of exclusionary practices as those he criticized (Thompson).

Since 1991, the controversy surrounding *The Field Day Anthology* has instigated debates over the creation of literary canons, particularly in terms of what should be included and, invariably, what gets excluded. Surrounding the praise and positive reviews congratulating the outstanding achievements of the Field Day publication, objections emerged from various members of the academic community. Some criticism attacked the apparent northern nationalist bias of the writings included in the anthology. But the most significant criticism was raised over the large-scale exclusion of women’s literature and of writing pertaining to the women’s movement of the late twentieth century. In her explication of the controversy over the anthology, Caitriona Crowe asserts that there were two primary objections from feminists: firstly, documentation regarding the women’s movement and its historical significance were ignored, and secondly, women were grossly underrepresented in the fiction, poetry, drama, and Irish language sections (Crowe 4). Insofar as the editors were able to construct an anthology that included neglected writers, they continued to overlook women and their significance in Ireland’s literary history.

While Deane apologetically admitted that the collection excluded an important element of Irish writing, his acknowledgement did little to assuage the concern that this

anthology contributed to the exclusion of women from the Irish literary canon. The creation of such an anthology, which professed to include marginal texts, served as an authoritative decision as to what texts are and are not worthy of canonization. Nuala O’Faolain, an Irish journalist who both praised the anthology for its intellectual accomplishment and heavily criticized it for its exclusion of women, pointed out the problematic nature of using anthologies like this to establish canon. She recalls the introduction to the anthology, in which Deane writes “what we show is an example of the way in which canons are established and the degree to which they operate as systems of ratification and authority” (quoted in Crowe 3). This, O’Faolain argues, is the danger of such an anthology: “While this book was demolishing the patriarchy of Britain on a grand front, its own, native, patriarchy was sitting there. Smug as ever” (quoted in Crowe 3).

The Irish patriarchy referenced by O’Faolain constitutes what Helen Thompson calls the “masculinist paradigm” to which Irish women are ill-fitted. Following the publication of *The Field Day Anthology*, feminists urged a reworking of this paradigm in Irish literature to include women’s writing. In his defense, Deane argued that the literary tradition in Ireland has always been an oppressive one, one that excludes writing which does not fit in well with modern conceptions of Irishness. Years before the publication of the anthology, he writes of the need for “the revision of our prevailing idea of what it is that constitutes the Irish reality” (quoted in Crowe 3). Yet in attempting to adjust these views to reflect a more realistic idea of Irish life and literature, Deane and his anthology virtually ignore the accomplishments and progress of half the population of Ireland.

To their credit, Deane and his fellow editors did participate in discussions concerning the revision of the anthology to include women following the feminist

protests at the original publication. Caitriona Crowe mentions one such discussion held at Trinity College during a conference for the Irish Association for the Study of Anglo-Irish Literature in 1992. At this meeting, Irish poet Eavan Boland spoke out against the omissions of the anthology, although she, like O'Brien, was one of the few women included in the original publication. She addressed the issue of canon and warned "The Field Day Anthology indicates the fact that those who put together canons which confuse power with authority do so at their peril" (Crowe 4). She argues that their creation of a "nationalist interpretation of literature" has created a theory of national literature—one which women do not easily fit into.

By August of 1992, the Field Day editors, represented by Deane, announced that a fourth volume would be compiled to include writings by and about Irish women. Eleven years after the publication of the first three volumes, two additional volumes, collectively edited by women, were launched in Dublin. The Introduction states that "these volumes set out to challenge existing canons of Irish writing" and that this anthology is "the first attempt to bring together a substantial body of written documents produced by and about women since writing began in Ireland" (Crowe 9). It addresses issues of politics, sexuality, religion, and the women's movement in addition to including women writers previously left out of the literary canon.

The reception of volumes IV and V was mixed and, according to Rebecca Pelan, can be characterized in two ways. First, Pelan notes that some critics regarded the supplement as a "loose canon," representing a loss in the value of literary aesthetics and a failure in proving the merit of female literature ("Loosening the Literary Canon" 94). To these critics, Pelan argues for a challenge to conventional methods of literary evaluation.

Women's writing cannot be assessed solely from a traditional aesthetic viewpoint; instead, it must be evaluated according to new standards that include the social, cultural, sexual, and political contexts that shape women's experiences. The critics who belong to the second category see this reworking of conventional standards as essential, and consider volumes IV and V to be a "loosening of the canon" which opens up the Irish canon to those who do not adhere to the masculinist paradigm discussed above ("Loosening the Literary Canon").

Despite the mixed reviews of volumes IV and V of *The Field Day Anthology*, their publication indicates the immense progress made by feminists and women writers in addressing the need for a reevaluation of literary merit and canonicity. That such an anthology was fought for and successfully published reveals the achievements made by and for women in the past two decades. It also represents an important shift towards thinking about women's history as an academic discipline, which signifies a further victory for feminism in Ireland. During the *Field Day* debates, O'Brien occupied a unique position as one of the few female writers included in the original three volumes. She was not completely denied acceptance as an important Irish writer, but feminist academics believed that the short excerpts of O'Brien's work chosen for these volumes were not representative on the breadth and influence of her work. With the publication of the fourth and fifth volumes of the women's anthology, O'Brien's writing was given a more prominent placement and she was acknowledged as one of the forerunners of women writers who wrote freely about female experience within Ireland. In this way, she existed as both part of the existing, male-dominated literary canon but also a crucial element of the new, more pluralistic canon that celebrated women's achievements in

Ireland.

As an in-between figure in Irish literature—one whose popularity and success guaranteed her at least a cursory inclusion in the prevailing Irish canon yet also one who was consistently denied literary credibility—O’Brien was simultaneously alienated from and included in the ‘boys club’ that was the Irish literary establishment for much of the twentieth century. Contemporary women writers now look back at O’Brien and recognize that she was among the first writers who allowed their work as women to flourish and become accepted in Ireland. Liz McManus indicates that the generation of writers following O’Brien experienced a radically transformed Ireland and credits her with taking part in subversive writing that was “dependent on the Irish context now unrecognizable and firmly rooted in the past” (Moloney 81). By taking the initial leap into unexplored women’s territory, O’Brien introduced possibilities for women’s writers that were previously non-existent.

Anne Enright, one of Ireland’s most celebrated contemporary novelists, was born during the 1960s and acknowledges O’Brien as a remarkable figure in Irish literary history. Enright argues that O’Brien “exception to all those rules” that made a successful writer in Ireland—she was not a man, she was not wealthy, and she came from the west of Ireland from an unknown family. Because of this, Enright calls Edna O’Brien “the great, the wonderful mistake in all of that scheme of things” (Moloney 55). Similarly, Miriam Dunne writes that “It would be difficult for any Irish woman writer to ignore the impact of her work during the repressive Ireland of the 1960s (Moloney 49). Virtually all contemporary Irish women writers, particularly those interviewed by Helen Thompson and Caitriona Moloney in *Irish Women Writers: Voices from the Field*, express their

gratitude to O'Brien for both inspiring them and opening up the possibilities for women's writing in Ireland.

CONCLUSION

O'Brien's early novels can be seen as the seminal texts which shaped women's writing for decades to come. In spite of her difficult reception in Ireland, O'Brien gave a voice to women's experience as well as women's creativity with her unprecedented and unapologetic fictional renderings of Irish life. She offers a real and relatable image of Irish women during a period that saw the beginnings of the women's movement and social change within Ireland, creating an alternate view of womanhood as prescribed by the patriarchal hegemony operating in twentieth century Ireland. As a woman and as a writer, O'Brien persistently pushed the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Yet at all times, she remained chained to the society she critiques.

As I have shown, O'Brien presented, through fiction, a literary and historical impression of life for women during a period in Irish history marked by male control and female subordination. In her early novels, she reconstructs ideal womanhood by creating characters who teeter on the edge of radical subversion of their society's constructed image of womanhood, yet she also ensures that these women are constantly reeled back in by male authoritarian control. Even so, O'Brien was one of the few Irish writers, and arguably the only woman writer at this time, who actively resisted the Irish Catholic image of the ideal woman and therefore, resisted the patriarchal structures who insisted on such an image of womanhood. Like Kate and Baba in *The Country Girls Trilogy*, she was punished for her transgressions—in her case, by being censored and attacked in her home country—and therefore occupied an unsettled position in terms of her resistance to Irish patriarchal control.

By creating characters who struggle with their perceptions and attitudes towards women, instead of unquestioningly accepting their roles as sacrificial wives and mothers, O'Brien presents her readers with the opportunity to resist the patriarchal ideology that suggests women's inferiority. As evidenced by the passionate and numerous positive responses to her writing by Irish men and women, O'Brien provided an avenue for resistance to the patriarchal institutions in control of Irish society. Just by reading her novels—and even more so by speaking highly of them in media or in letters—Irish people rebelled against the ideology that told them what women should be and what they should read, and most importantly, negated the idea that 'natural' roles for women could be easily defined.

As we saw in O'Brien's addition of an epilogue to *The Country Girls Trilogy* two and a half decades after her first novel was published, the position of women in Ireland remained unstable and continued to be influenced by inherited norms of womanhood into the 1980s. Today, fifty years after *The Country Girls* exploded onto Ireland's literary scene, Irish women, for the most part, no longer find themselves under such a controlling system of patriarchy. Still, most politicians, business owners, and top earners are men, but this trend appears elsewhere in Europe and in the United States. In many areas of Ireland, the Catholic Church has lost its domineering influence as abuse scandals have rocked the spiritual credibility of this powerful institution. The state, consequently, has loosened its ties with the Church and has liberalized its views on sexuality and contraception, although abortion still remains a contentious issue throughout the country.

In looking at these changes that have occurred since the 1960s, it is easy to assume that Ireland has simply caught up to its fellow European countries, spurred on by

pressure to modernize with the rest of the western world. Yet by reading O'Brien's early texts and examining the spectrum of responses and reactions she incited, it becomes clear that her writing acted as an impetus for this social change by spurring women to talk about divisive issues and to relate to shared female experience. In addition to being a talented writer and successful woman, O'Brien played an active role in transforming the literary and social landscape of Ireland, a task that was later taken up by the women's movement and by the women she influenced to express their own stories.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books

- Bradley, Anthony and Marianne Vailius. *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland*. Amherst, Mass: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997. Print.
- Cahalan, James M. *Double Visions: Women and Men in Modern and Contemporary Irish Writing*. 1st ed. Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 1999. Print.
- Carlson, Julia. *Banned in Ireland: Censorship & the Irish Writer*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990. Print.
- Eckley, Grace. *Edna O'Brien*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1974. Print.
- Greenwood, Amanda. *Edna O'Brien*. Tavistock: Northcote House, 2003. Print.
- Guppy, Shusha. "The Art of Fiction: Edna O'Brien." *Paris Review* 26 (Summer 1984): 22-50. Web.
- Kiberd, Declan. *Inventing Ireland*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996. Print.
- Laing, Kathryn, Sinead Mooney and Maureen O'Connor. *Edna O'Brien: New Critical Perspectives*, Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006. Print.
- Mac Curtain, Margaret. "Moving Statues and Irishwomen." *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 76.302 (1987): 139-147. Print.
- Moloney, Caitriona. *Irish Women Writers Speak Out: Voices from the Field*. 1st ed. Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 2003. Print.
- O'Brien, Edna. *Girls in Their Married Bliss*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967. Print.
- Mother Ireland*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976. Print.
- The Country Girls Trilogy and Epilogue*. London: Cape, 1987. Print.
- An Edna O'Brien Reader*. New York: Warner Books, 1994. Print.
- O'Connor, Maureen and Lisa Coletta. *Wild Colonial Girl: Essays on Edna O'Brien*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006. Print.

- O'Connor, Pat, *Emerging Voices: Women in Contemporary Irish Society*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1998. Print.
- O'Connor, Sarah and Christopher Shepard. *Women, Social and Cultural Change in Twentieth Century Ireland: Dissenting Voices?* Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008. Print.
- O'Connor, Teresa. *The Comic Tradition in Irish Women Writers*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996. Print.
- Ruskin, John. *The works of John Ruskin*. G. Allen, 1905. Print.
- Smyth, Ailbhe. *Irish Women's Studies Reader*. Dublin, Ireland: Attic Press, 1993. Print.
- Pelan, Rebecca. *Two Irelands*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005. Print.
- Stephens, E. *The Novel of Personal Relationships: A Study of Three Contemporary Women Novelists*. Atlanta: s.n., 1976. Print.
- Thompson, Helen. *The Current Debate About the Irish Literary Canon: Essays Assessing The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*. Lewiston, N.Y: E. Mellen Press, 2006. Print.
- Tyson, Lois: *Critical Theory Today*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Unknown. "Pornography: The Longford Report." London: Coronet Books, 1972.
- Walby, Sylvia. *Gender Transformations*. Routledge, 1997. Print.

Scholarly Articles

- Balzano, Wanda. "Godot Land and its Ghosts." *Wild Colonial Girl: Essays on Edna*

O'Brien. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006. Pp. 92-109. Print.

Bell, Millicent. "Baba and Kate." *The New York Times*. Feb. 18, 1968. Web.
<http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/04/09/specials/obrien-bliss.html>

Broyard, Anatole. "The Rotten Luck of Kate and Baba." *The New York Times*. May 11, 1986. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1986/05/11/books/the-rotten-luck-of-kate-and-baba.html>>

Byron, Kristine. "In the Name of the Mother: Reading and Revision in Edna O'Brien's Country Girls Trilogy and Epilogue" *Wild Colonial Girl*. Ed. Maureen O'Connor and Lisa Colletta. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006. Pp 14-30.

Cahalan, James M. "Female and Male Perspectives on Growing Up Irish in Edna O'Brien, John McGahern and Brian Moore." *Colby Quarterly* 31:1 (1995): 55-73.

Chase, Elizabeth. "Rewriting Genre in *The Country Girls Trilogy*." Forthcoming in *New Hibernia Review*. Print.

Crowe, Caitriona "Testimony to a Flowering" *The Dublin Review*, Vol. 10, 2002. Web.

Drisceoil, Donal Ó. "'The best banned in the land': Censorship and Irish Writing since 1950." *The Yearbook of English Studies* 35 (2005): 146-160. MHRA: London, 2005. Print.

Hargreaves, Tamsin. "Women's Consciousness and Identity in Four Irish Women Novelists," *Cultural Contexts and Literary Idioms in Contemporary Irish Literature*, ed. Michael Kenneally. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1988.

Inglis, Tom. "Origins and Legacies of Irish Prudery: Sexuality and Social Control in Modern Ireland" *Eire/Ireland* 40, 2005.pp. 9-37.

Ingman, Heather. "Edna O'Brien: Stretching the Nation's Boundaries." *Irish Studies Review* 10.3 (2002): 253. Web.

Lindahl-Raittila, Iris. "Negotiating Irishness: Edna O'Brien's 1990s Trilogy." *Nordic Irish Studies* 5 (2006): 73-86. Print.

McMahon, Sean. "A Sex by Themselves: An Interim Report on the Novels of Edna O'Brien." *Eire-Ireland* 2:1 (1967): 79-87.

- Morgan, Eileen. "Mapping Out a Landscape of Female Suffering: Edna O'Brien's Demythologizing Novels." *Women's Studies* 29 (2000): 449-76.
- O'Brien, Darcy. "Edna O'Brien: A Kind of Irish Childhood." *Twentieth-Century Women Novelists*. Ed. Thomas F. Staley. Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1982. 179-90.
- O'Brien, Edna. "Why Irish Heroines Don't Have to be Good Anymore." *The New York Times*. May 11, 1986. <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/04/09/specials/obrien-heroin.html>>
- O'Brien, Peggy. "The Silly and the Serious: An Assessment of Edna O'Brien." *Massachusetts Review* 28.3 (1987): 474-88. Print.
- O'Faolain, Nuala. "Women, Writing, and Ireland Now" in *Ireland and the Arts* edited by Tim Pat Coogan. A special issue of *Literary Review*. London: Namara Press, 1983. Pp. 88-91.
- Pelan, Rebecca. "Loosening the Literary Canon, or Literally Loose Canon?" in *The Current Debate about the Irish Literary Canon: Essays Reassessing the Field Day Anthology of Writing*, Thompson, H ed(s)., Mellen Press : New York, 2006.
- Pelan, Rebecca. "Edna O'Brien's 'Stage-Irish' Persona: An 'Act' of Resistance." *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*. 19.1 (1993): 67-78.
- Pelan, Rebecca. "Edna O'Brien's Love Objects." *Wild Colonial Girl*. Ed. Maureen O'Connor and Lisa Colletta. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006. Pp. 58-77.
- Popot, Raymonde. "Edna O'Brien's Paradise Lost" in *Cahiers Irlandais*, 59700 Marcq-en-Baroeul, France. 4-5: 255-85, 1976. Print.
- Robinson, Mary. "Women and the Law in Ireland" *Irish Women's Studies Reader*. Dublin, Ireland: Attic Press, 1993. Print.
- Shenker, Israel. "A Novelist Speaks of Work and Love." *The New York Times*. January 2, 1973, p.42. Print.
- Slater, Mary Jo. "Exiles from Romance." *The New Republic*. 30 June 1986: 36-8. Print.

Taylor, Judith. "Feminist Tactics and Friendly Fire in the Irish Women's Movement." *Gender and Society* 12.6 (1998): 674-691. Print.

Weekes, Ann Owen. "Martyrs to Mistresses? The Mother Figure in Edna O'Brien's Fiction." *Back to the present, forward to the past*. Rodopi: New York, 2006. Print.

Woodward, Richard. "Edna O'Brien: Reveling in Heartbreak." *The New York Times*. March 12, 1989. Web. < <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/03/12/magazine/edna-o-brien-reveling-in-heartbreak.html?pagewanted=1>>

Yeats, John Butler. "Ireland out of the Dock," *United Irishmen* 10, no. 241. Web.

Primary Sources

Emory University Archival Material

Letter from Ernest Gebler to Edna O'Brien, Jan. 28, 1964. Edna O'Brien papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

Letter from E. Flynn to Edna O'Brien, undated. Edna O'Brien papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

Letter from unsigned, undated to Edna O'Brien (begins "You deal well with the theme of Passion"). Edna O'Brien papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

Letter from Gennaro Carpenter to Edna O'Brien, Sept. 11, 1966. Edna O'Brien papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

Letter from Norman Funston to Edna O'Brien, 1966. Edna O'Brien papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

Letter from Don Heggie to Edna O'Brien, Oct. 1966. Edna O'Brien papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

Letter from Robert Horner to Edna O'Brien, Aug. 1966. Edna O'Brien papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

Letter from Brendan Lynch to Edna O'Brien, undated. Edna O'Brien papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

Letter from Harcourt Ray to Edna O'Brien, 1967. Edna O'Brien papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

Letter from Desmond Hogan to Edna O'Brien, 1967. Edna O'Brien papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

Letter from Pat Van Twest to Edna O'Brien, 1967. Edna O'Brien papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

Letter from unsigned to Edna O'Brien, Jan 1981. Edna O'Brien papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

Edna O'Brien, typescript draft of *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, Edna O'Brien Papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

Baird, Joan, typescript of *Edna O'Brien: Annotated Checklist Bibliography and Handbook*, Edna O'Brien Papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

Pearce, Sandra Manoogian, "An Interview with Edna O'Brien," Edna O'Brien Papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

Irish Print Media

"East Clare Welcome to Miss Edna O'Brien," *Nenagh Guardian*, Apr 5, 1969, p. 7.

"A drunken, feckless, and inefficient people," *Kerryman*, Feb. 5, 1966, p. 12.

"Reform Society queries powers of censors," *Irish Independent*, Dec. 5, 1966, p. 8.

Proinsias Mac 'Aonghusa, "Censorship of 'Girls in Their Married Bliss,'" *Munster Express*, Dec 23, 1964, p. 5.

"Scarriff," *Nenagh Guardian*, July 25, 1959, p. 7.

"Honest and Forthright," *Irish Farmers Journal*, Nov 19, 1966, p. 30.

"Opinions on film and book censorship" *Munster Express*, Nov 5, 1965, p. 5.

Proinsias Mac 'Aonghusa, "Our censorship," *Munster Express*, Oct 16, 1964, p. 3.

Maher, Mary. "Who's Afraid of Edna O'Brien," *The Irish Times*, Dec. 14, 1967, p 8.

"I agree," *Irish Farmers Journal*, Dec 17, 1966, p. 23.

"Censorship," *Munster Express*, Dec 4, 1964, p. 3.