

EDNA O'BRIEN:  
CENSORSHIP, SEXUALITY AND  
DEFINING THE "OTHER"

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the works of Edna O'Brien, an Irish female writer whose works span from 1960-present. O'Brien is an imperative author for study as she broke the gender barriers of a double patriarchal system instilled by both Church and State in Ireland. O'Brien chose self-exile in London to write about her native women in spite of the rapacious Irish Censorship Board. In this thesis Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity and gender subversion, Michel Foucault's theories of power, and Chris Weedon's theories of patriarchy and feminism are utilized to demonstrate how O'Brien sought to expose the disenfranchisement of Irish women that persisted in the last half of the twentieth century. Regardless of how some Irish viewed O'Brien as a "fallen colleen", she continues to write stories of women's issues involving their sexuality, place in society, lack of education, lesbianism and even abortion.

INTRODUCTION: “WOMEN’S BODIES ARE GIVEN A FOUNDATIONAL STATUS: THEY ARE BOTH THE FOCUS OF WOMEN’S OPPRESSION AND THE BASIS OF WOMEN’S POSITIVE DIFFERENCE FROM MEN” (Weedon 29).

Edna O’Brien’s texts are significant because her narratives explore gender performativity, the difference of “the other” or alterity of women in mid-twentieth century Irish patriarchal society, and the disenfranchisement created by the lack of education made available to women. Irish Women did not have many choices as to what their fate could or should be—a question that concerned O’Brien and consumed her narratives. In O’Brien’s texts “gender is seen as an elaborate system of male domination of women’s minds and bodies which is at the basis of all social organization. The term used to signify this universal system of oppression is *patriarchy*” (Weedon 20). According to the patriarchal system put in place by both the Irish Catholic Church and Irish government, O’Brien should not have even considered writing as an occupation. Women should either be raising children at home or serving God in a convent.

While O’Brien’s narratives disclose the disenfranchisement and alterity of women, they also provide an aesthetic language that draws in the reader. In *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, Baba thinks aloud as she is in stirrups at the gynecologist’s office:

I was thinking of women and all they have to put up with, not just washing nappies or not being able to be high-court judges, but all this. All this poking and probing and hurt. And not only when they go to the doctors but when they go to bed as brides with the men that love them. Oh, God, who does not exist, you hate women, otherwise you’d have made them different. And Jesus, who snubbed your mother, you hate them more. Roaming around all that time with a bunch of men, fishing; and Sermons on the Mount. Abandoning women. (O’Brien 473)

This passage alone demonstrates the disenfranchisement, “not being able to be high-court judges” and the alterity that O’Brien felt as a woman. Baba exclaims “Oh, God, who does not exist, you hate women, otherwise you’d have made them different.” Apparently, because God did not make women different, he hated them and Jesus did not keep the company of women, instead “roaming around all that time with a bunch of men, fishing; and Sermons on the Mount. Abandoning women.” O’Brien, through Baba, revolts against the patriarchal concepts of the Church that instilled God as male and his son, the Savior, as also male. As several feminist studies have demonstrated, “a divine male both legitimates male authority and deifies masculinity” (Eilberg-Schwartz 2), thus creating the patriarchal system in Ireland.

O’Brien’s questions of gender and religion are especially significant given the context of the time that she was writing. The roles and activities that were precipitated by the Catholic Action Movement (CAM) directly influenced the newly formed Irish government’s policies on censorship and gender roles. The CAM was not restricted to only Ireland, but was Pope Pius X’s response to the Modernist Crisis in all of Europe. The Pope disliked the new forms of liberalism that he saw influencing the general public, a couple of these new liberal thinkers being Nietzsche and Marx. In response to the Modernist Crisis, the Pope mobilized local Churches to propagate Catholic lay organizations where the common people could influence their peers. Coincidentally, the Pope’s response to this “crisis” reached its peak as Ireland was negotiating to have its country back. The Irish Catholic Church was able to insert itself directly into the newly formed government of Ireland and affected changes that not only reduced the mobility

and publish-ability of authors and artists, but also confined the woman's role to that of the home.

The gender expectations for the Irish people was set forth in a double patriarchal system. The system stemmed from both the government and the Church who stipulated the roles of each family member. In the minutes from the Committee on Evil Literature (a committee appointed by the Minister for Justice under the direction of the Church), it was written: "it is clear that in a large family, the child is brought up in a most stimulating atmosphere of poverty, chastity and obedience – the three foundations of all stable society" (Minutes 12). The 1937 Constitution of the Irish Republic echoed similar sentiments when in Article 41 it stated: "The State recognizes that by her life in the home, the woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The State shall therefore endeavour to ensure that mothers will not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties at home" (Jacquette 73). O'Brien strongly felt this patriarchal influence and it appears and reappears in her texts as she examines issues of gender subversion and gender performativity.

Regardless of the patriarchal system O'Brien had been born into, she was able to discern how women were treated inferior to men. After choosing self-exile in London, where she felt she could write with the distance and perspective needed to write about one's homeland, and also not have to face the daily persecution of the Irish, she completed her first novel in only three weeks. When asked about living among the Irish, O'Brien responded:

It's the people in the town or village where you might happen to live, being very aware of your comings and goings, your movements, and your possible writing. Writing itself is hard enough besides putting up with personal stick about it. It irks me, people constantly saying to me, 'Oh, why don't you come back to Ireland,' as if living elsewhere were a kind of betrayal. (Carlson 75)

O'Brien clearly found comfort in being removed from her native country in which she wrote about, and as she continued to gain confidence in herself and her writing, she often wrote about the woman's condition more directly and unapologetically. O'Brien continually challenged the views of the Church on issues such as divorce, contraception and abortion. Between her narratives concerning these types of issues and the fact that she was a woman made her a target for intense scrutiny and censorship. Even fellow censored writer Benedict Kiely commented:

The current determined persecution of the novels of Edna O'Brien is a case that calls for particular study. It is caused by a hangover (the Irish time lag) from days before women got the vote, from a feeling that while it's bad and very bad for a man to speak out and tell the truth it is utterly unthinkable that a woman (bringing shame on the fair daughters of Erin) should claim any such liberty (Eckley 23).

Kiely refers to the "fair daughters of Erin", a perception of how the ideal woman should perform and look according to her gender. O'Brien with her flowing red hair could certainly be the image of the "Irish colleen", but because of her writing she instead was labeled as a fallen woman. When asked if the persecution of her novels had been more severe because she was so attractive, O'Brien responded, "probably. I mean, I'm not that attractive, but on a good day I can muster it" (Carlson 73). When prodded further on the image of the colleen O'Brien stated, "more codology, that sort of colleen image, being

very pretty and unblemished, sitting at the hearth” (Carlson 73). Again, even in O’Brien’s description of the colleen, she should appear attractive and her place is by the hearth in the home. In Judith Butler’s words, this physical image and physical placement “is always a surface sign, a signification on and with the public body that produces this illusion of an inner depth, necessity or essence that is somehow magically expressed” (Butler 134). Butler’s statement that the “public body that produces this illusion of an inner depth” explains not only how superficial the ideal gender appearance can be but also depicts how O’Brien appears to be the Irish colleen, the ideal woman by the hearth in the home. Yet her inner depth lies elsewhere, outside the home, in her writing, and even outside of Ireland. O’Brien’s own life and narratives continually capture the sentiment that while the woman may try to live up to this performative ideal on the outside, underneath it all she will always be who she is—even if she is not the ideal Irish colleen.

O’Brien’s texts will be analyzed in the following chapters utilizing Butler’s theories of gender performativity and subversion, Weedon’s theories on patriarchy, and Foucault’s theories on the relationship between power and sexuality. These theories are imperative to O’Brien’s texts as they assist in explaining the disenfranchisement of women in the Republic of Ireland. O’Brien’s first three novels, *The Country Girls Trilogy* will also be examined alongside O’Brien’s own life as there are parallels between her characters seeking to gain independence and O’Brien herself gaining her independence. Also being examined is O’Brien’s choice of self-exile. O’Brien often brings up the choice of exile as being a common one for both Irish men and women, and several of her

characters explore this same state of being. However, in order to understand the significance of O'Brien's novels in their time period and her narratives' proclamations of women's treatment under the double patriarchal system, the history of the Catholic Action Movement and the eventual creation of the censorship board must also be examined.

Chapter One "Fear of knowledge. Fear of communicating our desires, our secrets, our stream of consciousness. It lies behind censorship everywhere" (Carlson 79) will examine the historical context in which O'Brien writes. This chapter is a brief history of how the Catholic Action Movement inspired the Irish Catholic Church to become an integral part of the newly formed Republic of Ireland's government. In the process, several Catholic lay organizations were created, and among the most powerful, the Catholic Truth Society of Ireland (CTSI). This particular lay organization focused its attentions on the literature that the Catholic people of Ireland read. The CTSI was responsible for weekly Catholic subscriptions, burning of Protestant newspapers, and eventually instituting one of the more severe censorship laws created. In 1950, Robert Graves described the Irish law as the "fiercest literary censorship this side of the Iron Curtain" (Quinlan 50). Four decades after the newly formed government began organizing its patriarchal society around the Church's desires, and three decades after the censorship law was written in the books, O'Brien took up the pen. The historical context of this law and the tightly held religious beliefs of the government that impelled its citizens to similar strict beliefs are imperative in recognizing how O'Brien's narratives introduced a new way of thinking of Irish women's fates.

The second part of Chapter One, “You are Irish you say lightly and you walk London streets” (O’Brien 23) will examine O’Brien’s choice of self-exile in order to be able to write with the perspective and distance about her homeland and the fate of its women, which concerned her greatly. O’Brien’s characters are frequently written from the perspective that they themselves are exiles who struggle to reconcile their old life in Ireland with their new life (which frequently takes place in London.) The short story “The Doll” and the novel, *Mother Ireland* are analyzed to show how O’Brien grapples with alterity, or the state of being “the other.” She is neither Irish nor English, but a woman who is trying to find her place in her newly chosen society. Her struggle with cultural identity is not something that only O’Brien and her characters experience. It is a common feeling among the many Irish who left to find better work, better pay, and religious freedom, especially for women wishing to leave the double patriarchal society of Church and State.

Chapter Two, “I wrote these novels in the sixties and at a time when I was particularly concerned about the fate of women” (O’Brien ix) examines how Judith Butler’s ideas of gender performativity and gender subversion can be used to analyze the earliest texts of O’Brien, *The Country Girls Trilogy*. These texts are imperative to O’Brien’s career as they are not only her earliest voice but also are written at the time she is earning her independence through her writing and separating from her husband. The two main characters in the trilogy increasingly become more subversive in their gender roles in the four year period that O’Brien writes these texts and becomes more subversive in her own life. In the second part of the chapter, two short stories, “The Mouth of the

Cave,” and “Sister Imelda” originally published in 1968 and 1981, are examined for their admission to homosexual behavior between two women. Yet both women back down in each case so that they wouldn’t be ostracized from society. O’Brien indirectly writes about the possibility of lesbianism, but does not follow through with the ultimate gender subversion, the possibility that women could find pleasure and companionship with each other outside of the heteronormative standard.

Chapter Three, “It’s amazing that childhood really occupies at most twelve years of our early life... and the bulk of the rest of our lives is shadowed or coloured by that time” (Eckley 79) examines two Bildungsroman narratives, *A Pagan Place* and *Down by the River*. These narratives tell the lives of two young girls who are brutally introduced to sexuality by older men, in one narrative a priest, in the other, her own father. O’Brien not only tackles the issues of gender performativity and subversion in her narratives, but also issues of rape, incest and abortion. While there is not a direct link from reality to fiction about the priest and the young girl, O’Brien did write *Down by the River* after the actual story broke in Ireland in 1992. She was dismayed by the reactions of the government and religious officials who politicized what the outcome should be of the fetus. These officials barred the girl who had been raped by her own father from trying to go to London where it was presumed she would get an abortion. When asked about her writing a piece of fiction based on these events, O’Brien simply replied, “I don’t always write the most welcome or suitable stories about my homeland” (Wolff).

While Edna O’Brien writes an intricate narrative that frequently addresses women’s issues, the reader should not lose sight of her aesthetic as they read for the

detail. I hope that as each thesis chapter resolves itself that the reader is one step closer to realizing how pivotal O'Brien's work is given the context of the time in which she began writing. O'Brien's persistence in writing about women's fates a full decade before second-wave feminism begins indicates that she was ahead of her time and one of the first feminists to emerge out of the Republic of Ireland. As Jacquette has stated: "Edna O'Brien forced her readers to peer beyond the emerald green hills, the innocent children, the contented mothers to the Ireland of limitation and deprivation, the Ireland of confusion, of guilt, of penance, and of fear. Through her narratives the lives of women under a double patriarchal system – Church and State – were exposed" (Jacquette 8).

CHAPTER ONE: "FEAR OF KNOWLEDGE. FEAR OF COMMUNICATING OUR DESIRES, OUR SECRETS, OUR STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS. IT LIES BEHIND CENSORSHIP EVERYWHERE" (Carlson 79).

In 1921, after the Anglo-Irish treaty was signed and the Republic of Ireland given its independence, the Irish Catholic Church forged ahead with its Catholic Action Movement. This movement encouraged lay organizations of the people to promote the teachings and readings of the Church. The Church believed if they did not forge an immediate relationship with the newly formed government that the Catholic religion would be left behind in the reformation of the country. "Margaret O'Callaghan argues that, 'after independence the Catholic church sought an extended moral control in compensation for the loss of its historical role as the 'public voice of a wronged nation'" (Kilfeather 106). In other words, the Church had long stood for a people who had been subjugated to England, and once their freedom from this subjugation had been affirmed, the Church looked for a new role as the Republic of Ireland began anew as well. The Catholic Action Movement evolved into the Catholic Truth Society of Ireland (CTSI) as a more formal lay organization and as a means for constant vigilance of the common people. By 1926, 83 branches of CTSI had been established ensuring a "unified Catholic voice."

CTSI reached their public in part due to their vigilance of insuring the common people had adequate access to appropriate Catholic literature through the "Good Literature Crusade." The belief being that if every family had a subscription to a weekly Catholic magazine or newspaper that the "unified Catholic voice" would strengthen and the Church would retain its position in Irish society. If a family cancelled or refused to

take up a subscription to a piece of Catholic literature they were visited regularly by a member of CTSI until a subscription was taken up again. The family's admission to a subscription counted as a "conquest" for that particular CTSI member who persuaded the family.

For the Catholic Church at this time literature had a broad definition of being most anything in print. The Church believed that its people could easily be influenced by any text as they would take print at face value. As literary critic Adrian Johns has asserted: "printed texts are identical and reliable because that is simply what printing *is*. The identification is as momentous as it is straightforward. It has become the point of departure for all current interpretations of print and its cultural consequences" (Johns 256). The Church feared the "cultural consequences" of its people reading unapproved text, and believing secular literature instead of the Church's chosen literature.

After enforcing what literature Catholics should read weekly through the "Good Literature Crusade," CTSI next turned their attentions toward the local and British newspapers. These publicly produced newspapers, (especially the Protestant British ones) often included information in their print type that was considered unseemly for a proper Catholic audience. The British newspapers, for example, would include lists of those couples that had divorced and the crime section included crimes of a sexual or sensational nature that could taint the thoughts of the Catholic mind. CTSI began to seize and burn these newspapers, which they had deemed troubling for their reading public. Deana Heath describes this type of censorship by the Church and its affiliate group:

"Determining the 'competence' of particular individuals or social groups to partake of the

'cultural technology' of the printed word was a question not simply of gender, class, or age but also of practices of reading". CTSI and the Church were concerned that if the common people read about divorce or deviant sexual acts in print that they would be unable to practice self-control. The parts of the population that could be most influenced by this type of unseemly literature being women, children, and the poor, as they would not be able to separate the text from their moral values. When asked about this censorship, O'Brien replied, "The Russian censorship has always been political, and the Irish has always been religious. Sex is the factor here. The fear would be that the people would become libidinous, rampant" (Carlson 79).

The newspaper burnings were just the beginning of the censorship push that CTSI ultimately won. They convinced the Minister of Justice, Kevin O'Higgins, to establish a Committee on Evil Literature in the Department of Justice to review whether there should be a censorship law in place. The Committee consisted of a professor of English literature, two members of Parliament, a Church of Ireland clergyman and a Roman Catholic Priest. The religious balance of the Catholic and Protestant representation is interesting at this point in time when the Republic of Ireland was 93% Catholic. When the Committee returned with the decision that it was the Irish state's duty to prevent the circulation of publications that were considered to be obscene and morally corrupting; members of this all-powerful group (CTSI) threatened politicians that their elections and re-elections would be compromised if they didn't draft a censorship bill that fit their specifications. During these public debates a statement appeared in *The Irish Times* on September 29, 1928:

Ministers are exceedingly unhappy about the Bill. Most of them dislike it; they are afraid of the educated criticism it will provoke and of the abuses it will engender. Nevertheless they are unable to resist the peculiarly effective pressure which is being put upon them by various religious organisations. (Curtis 136)

One year later *The Irish Times* would lose the ability to print statements about the division between Church and State as the new impressionable government drafted and passed “The Censorship of Publications Act of 1929” and established the Censorship of Publications Board.

The laws enacted by the Act of 1929 established the Censorship of Publications Board. The Board, consisting of five members chosen by the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, has terms that expire every five years. The next Board will be appointed in November 2011. The Board has the ability to examine any book or periodical for sale in the Republic of Ireland. Any literature found to be obscene is prohibited from being sold, bought, or distributed after three of the five members agree to prohibit it. The Board is expected to measure its literary, scientific and historical merit, and its likely circulation and audience. A prohibition on a piece of literature lasts for 12 years, but the 12 year expiration only came after an amendment to the Act in 1967. At that time, 5,000 books came up for sale that had previously been banned. A prohibition can also be appealed to the Appeals Board, but the Appeals Board wasn’t established until the 1946 amendment to the original Act.

Current criticisms of the Board include the fact that its meetings are still held in secret and that the Board must investigate all complaints. The Church was especially

offended in 1988 when the Bible had to be considered as it was submitted by an anonymous complaint.

While there are not any current banned pieces of literature in Ireland, as the last on the banned list expired in 1988. There was a period over six decades, (1929-1988), that the list was quite extensive and the social constriction suffered by Irish writers was intense enough that several chose self-exile. When asked about the banning of books waning, O'Brien responded:

We have to take into account the prevailing social climate. Banning is only the tip of the iceberg. Keeping our psyches closed is the main bogey. Alas, I don't feel that there is much passion for literature in Ireland now. It's on the wane. It's 'Dynasty' and the potboilers, and that's sad. Very sad, really. They should be devouring the great classics—Thackeray, Dickens, Joyce, Proust, Flaubert, Chekov, and most of all Shakespeare, the greatest poet and psychologist of all. (Carlson 76)

O'Brien laments the lack of passion that the Irish currently have for literature, as it seems television shows have taken priority. Yet she does not conclude that the psyches of the Irish people are anymore open than what they were previously. Perhaps if literature was still a passion of the Irish people, then the banned list would continue to thrive. The Censorship of Publications Board is still elected every five years and would have to consider submissions if they received them.

After O'Brien published her first novel, *The Country Girls*, in 1960, and before the Censorship of Publications Board had a chance to review it, the priest of her hometown of Tuamgraney collected all the copies the women of the town had purchased and burned them on the chapel grounds. When asked about the burning, O'Brien simply replied, "it all belongs to the Middle Ages, don't you think?" (Carlson 72). She also

stated later in the same interview that the Church wanted to “keep [women] frozen—mute” (Carlson 75), one of the reasons O’Brien chose self-exile in London—she was better able to write her narratives away from the constrictive, patriarchal society that permeated Ireland. When asked in the same interview what kind of damage censorship had done in Ireland, O’Brien replied, “closed the minds of people. Frightened them. It’s a fuckup, if you’ll excuse the word. Ignorance and darkness and bigotry only lead to psychic sickness” (Carlson 77). The bigotry O’Brien refers to is the resistance to her lifestyle and her characters’ representations of women who differed from the ideal “Irish colleen”.

“You are Irish you say lightly and you walk London streets” (O’Brien 23).

Edna O’Brien once stated in an interview: “I realise now that I would have had to leave Ireland in order to write about it. Because one needs the formality and the perspective that distance gives in order to write calmly about a place” (Eckley 26). O’Brien was not the only writer to choose self-exile in order to write the fiction that allowed her to explore her memories of her native homeland. In fact, London was a particularly popular place for many Irish to live out their adulthood. As David Fitzpatrick is quoted, “growing up in Ireland meant preparing oneself to leave it” (Delaney 12). For O’Brien, it was more about the position of women in Ireland that made it difficult for her to write, “she’s not supposed to write. (A) she’s supposed to keep her thoughts to herself. And (B) she’s supposed to be doing maternal, domestic, useful things; not things that are the provenance of a man” (Carlson 75) were some of the reasons O’Brien listed for

choosing self-exile. In order for her to write about women's conditions, she had to live at a distance and write from that perspective. If she had stayed in Ireland, her neighborly peers and others would have pressured her to keep her thoughts to herself.

Instead, O'Brien chose to leave Ireland so she could write without the pressure of Irish criticism. In O'Brien's *Mother Ireland: A Memoir*, she writes about leaving for London with a sense of relief and pity:

Leaving Ireland was no wrench at all. I took the mail boat, like most others, sat up all night, watched the drinking, the spilling, walked the deck, remembered how Mr Thackeray and Mr Heinrich Boll had come in by boat to write leisurely about it, remembered the myriad others, natives who had gone out to forget. I had got away. That was my victory. The real quarrel with Ireland began to burgeon me then; I had thought of how it warped me, and those around me, and their parents before them, all stooped by a variety of fears—fear of church, fear of gombeenism<sup>1</sup>, fear of phantoms, fear of ridicule, fear of hunger, fear of annihilation, and fear of their own deeply ingrained aggression that can only strike a blow at each other, not having the innate authority to strike at those who are higher. Pity arose too, pity for a land so often denuded, pity for a people reluctant to admit that there is anything wrong. That is why we leave. Because we beg to differ. Because we dread the psychological choke. But leaving is only conditional. The person you are, is anathema to the person you would like to be. (O'Brien 126-27)

O'Brien's description of getting away in the mail boat is a victory, and even while on the mail boat "the real quarrel with Ireland began to burgeon me then" relates that even just the departure of Ireland allows O'Brien to begin to process all that she had encountered with her homeland and her childhood. She reflects on how she believes they are all warped by different fears and the frustration of the lower class that live as they do, "not having the innate authority to strike at those who are higher". Yet she also feels pity for

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<sup>1</sup> Ireland usury: money lending at extortionate rates

those same people who won't "admit that there is anything wrong" because they themselves have experienced the "psychological choke" and do not have the resolve to either change the situation in Ireland or to remove themselves as O'Brien and several others had. She also admits that just because an Irish man or woman leaves the country does not mean that they change—"leaving is conditional. The person you are, is anathema to the person you would like to be". The person O'Brien would like to be vehemently dislikes the person she is, and O'Brien resolves that this is why most of the Irish leave; they desire to be someone else because they feel the same anathema toward their original Irish identity.

O'Brien's fiction includes women who have chosen self-exile from patriarchal Ireland. Often in these pieces the women struggle to reconcile the differences of their homeland and the gender expectations found in their new living arrangements. What is unique about O'Brien is that she often writes these narratives from the first person perspective of the Irish woman exile. It's as though O'Brien herself, even after leaving Ireland decades before, still tries to reconcile the relief and the pity she feels about her old country.

The protagonist in the short story "The Doll" does similar reminiscing: "the years go by and everything and everyone gets replaced. Those we knew, though absent, are yet merged inextricably into new folk so that each person is to us a sum of many others and the effect is of opening box after box in which the original is forever hidden" (O'Brien 52). The "original" O'Brien is referring to in the short story is a doll from the main character's childhood that a teacher had seized after a Christmas play. Yet the "original"

memory that “is forever hidden” that both the protagonist and O’Brien allude to is Ireland. While they may have met new people and have tried new things in their new location, all the new merges with the old memories and these women can never escape the accumulation of memories that begin with their “original” homeland, and therefore these women can never begin entirely anew. O’Brien and her characters face a unique conundrum in that “we do in fact tend to perceive longtime acquaintances (most especially ourselves) cumulatively” (Ramage 39). Thus escape from memories even in a state of self-exile is never entirely possible.

The protagonist continues with her reminiscing by thinking:

I feel none of the rage and none of the despair.... I am on the run from them. I have fled. I live in a city. I am cosmopolitan. People come to my house, all sorts of people, and they do feats like dancing, or jesting, or singing, inventing a sort of private theater where we all play a part. I too play a part. My part is to receive them and disarm them, ply them with food and drink, and secretly be wary of them, be distanced from them.... So I am far from those I am with, and far from those I have left. (O’Brien 52)

The main character admits that she is on the run from “them,” the people and memories that she has of Ireland. Yet she also admits to playing a part in a private theater where she attempts to be friendly with her new acquaintances in London, but she is “far from those I am with, and far from those I have left.” While O’Brien’s characters attempt to reconcile their past Irish childhood with the new cosmopolitan lifestyle led by the adults, almost all her characters strain to truly find comfort in their choice of self-exile and in a sense struggle with the concept of alterity. The idea being that these exiled women exhibit such an “otherness” that they no longer are Irish colleens nor do they fit in with their adopted city of London.

Looking at O'Brien's narratives through the lens of Heidegger one could deduce that while O'Brien is articulating her fiction from her experience, she also constructs the differences that create the "other". Yet with language and ontology, one can never define themselves or their experiences without also showing what it is that they are not. In this sense, language does the action of separation for the writer. "While language holds together opposites usually set apart, it also holds apart the opposites it brings together. In this way, language eternally returns to difference" (Taylor 55). Any "otherness" that O'Brien may have felt before writing her experience in her narratives could never be resolved in the act of communicating her fiction simply because she repeatedly had to revisit the differences that set her apart. In the Introduction to *An Edna O'Brien Reader*, O'Brien herself writes: "Each book, while it may be different, owes its genesis to the preceding one and each book once completed becomes a source of dissatisfaction" (O'Brien ix). O'Brien herself admits that her communication of her experiences in fiction does not provide a satisfactory resolution for her state of alterity resulting from her gender and her nationality.

While O'Brien may have been dissatisfied with each book as it resolved itself, she persisted in writing not only about her relief and pity of leaving Ireland, but also continued to write about women's conditions in her homeland. These works are imperative in mid-twentieth century Ireland because of the socially constricted society of which she wrote about.

The early 1960s might be viewed as a period in which women began to develop a renewed consciousness of the wrongs by which they were oppressed, but they were only slowly beginning to organise forms of resistance. Edna O'Brien struck out against Irish

censorship with the *The Country Girls* trilogy (*The Country Girls*, 1960; *The Lonely Girl*, 1962; *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, 1964), which also sent a signal that Irish women were fretting under the repressive codes governing female sexuality, language and decorum. (Kilfeather 108)

Yet these “repressive codes governing female sexuality, language and decorum” are exactly what drove O’Brien out of Ireland. Safe across the Irish Sea, O’Brien wrote about the fate of women in her own country, hoping to bring light to a situation that brought her much trouble. It would not be until nearly a decade later that organizations such as the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women would begin to investigate the conditions and disenfranchisement of women and asked the Irish government to set up a National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW). In 1972, four years after NCSW was founded they would publish their findings. The *Report of the Commission on the Status of Women* made recommendations on employment, education, jury service, taxation, law, social welfare, rural life, political and cultural life. A Council for the Status of Women was established to press for implementation of the report. In 1971, a year previous to this report being released, the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement (IWLM) published their key demands for changes in women’s status. 11 years after O’Brien published her first novel.

O’Brien’s initiative to discuss women’s fates in her narratives gave voice to women even as O’Brien was being censored. There are stories in which O’Brien would travel across the Republic of Ireland’s national border with her books to sell them to women who wanted to read them—in spite of the censorship law or the rapacious censors who wanted to burn her books. Throughout O’Brien’s texts she addresses the gender

roles of men and women and the ideals they are expected to perform to—obviously in her own life she learns to subvert these expected gender roles, but they still influence her in her writing. She even writes of how countries are gendered given their potent or submissive traits. In her memoir to her native country O'Brien starts:

Countries are either mothers or fathers, and engender the emotional bristle secretly reserved for either sire. Ireland has always been a woman, a womb, a cave, a cow, a Rosaleen, a sow, a bride, a harlot, and, of course, the gaunt Hag of Beare.... She is thought to have known invasion from the time when the Ice Age ended and the improving climate allowed deer to throng her dense forests. (O'Brien 1)

Ireland has played all the roles that a woman can play, according to O'Brien's description. Ireland is a mother: a womb, a cow, a sow, Ireland is also a Rosaleen and a bride to the invaders when they first land and decide to claim her as their own. And yet Ireland is also a harlot, because after a period of time the invaders are done with her, they leave, and new invaders take possession. And in the end, Ireland is the "gaunt Hag of Beare", the epitome of the old woman that symbolizes winter storms and barrenness. O'Brien typifies her homeland as being of the female gender because of its history of invasion and domination by other more potent people and countries – specifically the English. O'Brien identifies potency as typically a male trait, more specifically, a trait that she is attracted to: "I have a very strong pull and obviously conflicting pull towards god and the devil, and I used to anyhow, observe and be drawn towards men who seemed to me to have very strong elements of both, and who would exert power over one—over one's mind and over one's body" (Eckley 39). One could argue that while O'Brien had a strong pull towards potent men, she also felt compelled to live in the more potent country

of England where she could write her narratives without Irish persecution. England was just close enough to Mother Ireland for the Irish people such as O'Brien to feel nostalgic, and yet far enough away and more structurally powerful economically, socially and politically for the immigrated Irish to believe they were transcending the limits that their homeland would have placed on them.

The other reading of O'Brien's pull towards potency exemplifies how strong a hold the double patriarchal system of Ireland had on her. She certainly subverted certain gender expectations, but she still held an attraction to male figures "who would exert power over one—over one's mind and over one's body," a statement that finds a certain amount of comfort in playing the role of the submissive female instilled by growing up in a patriarchal system. According to Kristeva, O'Brien is attempting to recover alterity, or the state of the "other" by reliving the role of the submissive female, O'Brien "retraces the fragile boundaries of the speaking being, closest to its dawn, to that bottomless 'origin' that is called primal repression" (Taylor 178). The repression is comforting because it is known; it is ingrained. The ability to advocate for one's own choices and subvert gender expectations is new unknown territory.

O'Brien acknowledges in her writings not only the double patriarchal system of Ireland but also the Church's teachings of women being impotent to men dating back to the culpability of Eve in Paradise. She demonstrates how the roles of gender performativity perpetuate the cycle of women being treated as inferior to men. According to Weedon, the definition of women's repression is attributed to: "patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men – by force,

direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor – determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male” (Weedon 20). The parts women are determined to play or not to play are created by men, and women will always subsume the role given to them by the hierarchical male. While O’Brien narrates the plight of female characters who subsume the roles given to them; she also has strong-minded characters such as herself that are able to step outside of the expected gender roles in an attempt to recognize an elusive freedom. This type of gender subversion is described by Butler as, “if gender is something one becomes—but can never be—then gender is itself a kind of becoming or activity, and that gender ought not be conceived as a noun or a substantial thing or a static cultural marker, but rather as an incessant and repeated action of some sort” (Butler 152). According to Butler, the cycle of gender performativity can be broken because it is vulnerable to being reduced to an activity, it is not something that someone *is* but something someone *does* repeatedly to generate the ideal of the gender.

O’Brien’s ability to subvert her own gender expectations set her up for censorship. Foucault’s examination of the prudishness of the bourgeois society in the seventeenth-century could certainly apply to twentieth-century Irish society: “without even having to pronounce the word, modern prudishness was able to ensure that one did not speak of sex, merely through the interplay of prohibitions that referred back to one another; instances of muteness which, by dint of saying nothing, imposed silence. Censorship” (Foucault 17). O’Brien, having grown up in the repressive, “imposed

silence” atmosphere of Ireland, would certainly take comfort in being able to write her narratives which expounded on women’s fates, their sexuality, and their religious questions in London, a land more known for its potency and free thinking than her native country.

O’Brien’s own life is an example of a woman subverting gender expectations and earning her freedom. Between 1960 and 1964 she published *The Country Girls Trilogy*, the second text of that trilogy, *The Lonely Girl*, was adapted to the screenplay, *Girl with Green Eyes*, and she wrote the play, *A Cheap Bunch of Nice Flowers* which was published in *Plays of the Year*. O’Brien’s early success allowed her the financial freedom to be able to dissolve her marriage to Ernest Gebler in 1964 (in London, divorce wasn’t legalized in Ireland until 1995) and engage in a custody battle for her two sons. “I was separated from them for some years. It was terrifying. I didn't want to take them from their father utterly. I did not. That's the truth. But I wanted them with me” (Cooke).

O’Brien’s exile from Ireland allowed her to not only write about patriarchal Ireland in comfort, but also allowed her to make choices about her marriage and the custody of her children that no woman would have been afforded in Ireland. Choices that O’Brien felt were imperative to a woman’s future and happiness.

CHAPTER TWO: "I WROTE THESE NOVELS IN THE SIXTIES AND AT A TIME WHEN I WAS PARTICULARLY CONCERNED ABOUT THE FATE OF WOMEN"  
(O'Brien ix).

O'Brien was concerned about the "fate of women" in the sixties because she also experienced a version of the fate that women faced. O'Brien's first three novels, *The Country Girls Trilogy*, examines the unique relationship between two childhood friends who come of age together, try to find romance together, and eventually turn to each other again when their marriages fail to bring expected satisfaction.

While these early works should not be considered an autobiography of O'Brien's, some of the similarities between the girls' lives and O'Brien's life are uncanny and show how O'Brien writes from her memory; especially the memories of the most formative years of childhood. O'Brien once stated in an interview: "It's amazing that childhood really occupies at most twelve years of our early life... and the bulk of the rest of our lives is shadowed or coloured by that time" (Eckley 79). It's fitting then, that *The Country Girls* is a Bildungsroman tale. It begins with two friends, Kate and Baba, who are about to finish primary school together and attend a convent school at the age of 14; an age when gender expectations are heightened as children transition into adulthood.

The duality of Kate and Baba's personalities lend to the narratives a dynamic of gender performativity and gender subversion. In order for the ideal performative to operate, "'sex' is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of the body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize 'sex' and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms" (Butler 1-2). The trilogy shows gender performativity in Kate, who "forcibly

materializes” her gender construct “through a forcible reiteration of norms”. She does well in school, goes to Mass and Confession without complaint, and earns a scholarship to the convent where Baba plans and executes a dirty note, signed with both their names, to get the girls expelled. Baba often represents the opposite of Kate’s performativity with her subversion of gender expectations. “The task for women, Wittig argues, is to assume the position of the authoritative, speaking subject—which is in some sense their ontologically grounded ‘right’—and to overthrow both the category of sex and the system of compulsory heterosexuality that is its origin” (Butler 156-157). Baba often is the first of many of the girls to be the authoritative speaking subject. While Baba does not overthrow the category of sex or the system of compulsory heterosexuality, she certainly sets her boundaries that men and other women come to respect most of the time throughout the duration of the trilogy.

The second subversion occurs when Kate follows Baba to Dublin. At 18 years of age, the girls live on their own in Dublin and attend college classes. While the urban areas were open to women in classes, the rural country where Kate and Baba hailed from was not entirely supportive. Even still, the girls enjoyed their newfound freedom, and Baba celebrates it by dating a rich, middle-aged man. Kate, on the other hand, waits for a man from her past, and while preparing for her date with him contemplates on what it’s like to be a woman:

It is the only time that I am thankful for being a woman, that time of evening when I draw the curtains, take off my old clothes, and prepare to go out. Minute by minute the excitement grows. I brush my hair under the light and the colors are autumn leaves in the sun. I shadow my eyelids with black stuff and am astonished by the look of mystery it gives to my eyes. 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 her friends. But I am happy at that time of night. I feel tender toward the world. (O'Brien 160-61)

Kate's train of thought while she dresses herself for her date demonstrates the emotions she feels about her expected gender role, she's thankful for taking the time to make herself pretty, but also hates "being a woman. Vain and shallow and superficial," which implies that in order to prove herself among her female friends, the man who says he loves her must also write it down so that she has evidence for her peers. The peer social structure reinforces the performativity that a young woman has to follow for social acceptance, or "the construal of 'sex' no longer as a bodily given on which the construct of gender is artificially imposed, but as a cultural norm which governs the materialization of bodies" (Butler 2-3). According to the "cultural norm, which governs the materialization of bodies", Kate feels forced to imitate others, especially Baba, in order to feel accepted. Kate imitates the way Baba shadows her eyes and is "astonished by the look of mystery it gives to [her] eyes". This imitation is what creates the repetition of young women consistently attempting to perform to an ideal standard to be accepted not only amongst their peers, but also accepted by men. In Judith Butler's words:

The naturalistic effects of heterosexualized genders are produced through imitative strategies; what they imitate is a phantasmatic ideal of heterosexual identity, one that is produced by the imitation as its effect. In this sense, the 'reality' of heterosexual identities is performatively constituted through an imitation that sets itself up as the origin and the ground of all imitations. (127-28)

By Kate taking the time to change out of her old clothes, brush her hair, and shadow her "eyelids with black stuff," she demonstrates what the ideal woman should look like when

a man is taking her out to dinner. She may “hate being a woman” for being “vain and shallow and superficial,” but she also loves that time of night when she “draws the curtains” and “prepares to go out.” Yet, to prepare herself to go out, she must apply the superficiality of the shadow to her eyelids, so while she enjoys the “mystery it gives to my eyes,” she is consciously recreating her superficial, performative role in that part of being a woman that she hates.

What Kate does not know about being a woman is the way her body procreates and what sex with her gentleman lover can do. When Kate and her lover are planning a getaway to Vienna, she asks her landlady to borrow a nightgown for the momentous occasion of losing her virginity. Joanna knows what the gown is for and tells Kate, “‘mind you not fill up with baby,’ I laughed. It was impossible. I had an idea that couples had to be married for a long time before a woman got a baby” (O’Brien 169). Kate demonstrates in this passage that even at the age of 18, sex had not been spoken of nor had she learned about babies at primary school or at the convent. O’Brien utilizes Kate’s lack of knowledge as an example of how damaging the censorship laws actually were for Irish citizens, particularly women who were kept from knowing the sexuality of their own bodies. According to Weedon the calls for women to know their reproductive capabilities would not come until the late 1960s, early 1970s. In one such article printed in 1973 in *Sister*, the Newspaper of the Los Angeles Women’s Center:

We must begin, as women, to reclaim our land, and the most concrete place to begin is with our own flesh. Self-and-sister education is a first step, since all that fostered ignorance and self-contempt dissolve before the intellectual and emotional knowledge that our female bodies are constructed with beauty, craft, cleanliness, yes, holiness. Identification with the colonizer’s

standards melts before the revelations dawning on a woman who clasps a speculum in one hand and a mirror in the other. She is demystifying her own body for herself, and she will never again be quite so alienated from it. Weedon 27)

Even women in the United States were calling to have “the intellectual and emotional knowledge” about their bodies and reproductive capabilities. American women also did not have the overbearing patriarchal presence of Church and State that governed what the Irish woman should or should not know.

Irish women operated without the basic fundamentals of how life began simply because the topics of sex and procreation were indecent. In the words of Jacquette, “O’Brien chronicled the constricting culture that warped women’s perceptions of themselves as sexual beings” (182). The idea that women had a difficult time perceiving themselves as sexual beings is demonstrated in this novel even further when Kate imagines herself in a nightgown, “I wanted a blue flowing transparent nightgown. So that we could waltz before we got into bed. To tell you the truth, I always shirked a little at the getting into bed” (O’Brien 167). Even though Kate knows that losing her virginity might eventually happen, she cannot picture herself getting into the same bed as the man she’s decidedly in love with. The Irish culture and its censorship constricted not only the knowledge of how bodies worked, but also constricted the knowledge that men and women had going into relationships with each other.

The gender expectations found in the Irish culture in the mid-twentieth century also allude to restrictions of what each sex could admit to knowing or the types of knowledge pursued. In the second novel, *The Lonely Girl*, we find that Kate never met up with her previous lover, (his wife found out), that she still has her virginity, and is still on

the lookout for a man. While she is sitting in a tea shop with Eugene, her latest attraction, he asks her what she likes to read, since he already knows that she is an English major in college. When she replies that she reads Chekhov, James Joyce and James Stephens, she stops herself “in case he should think that I was showing off” (O’Brien 196). Eugene is intrigued that he has found a woman that enjoys reading like him and presses her further to know what Kate is thinking. Instead of risking being a showoff again, Kate plays the part of the educated woman who does not have opinions on matters. ““I don’t think very much really; I think about getting new clothes or going on my holidays or what we’ll have for lunch”” (O’Brien 196). The performative ideal for the Irish female during the mid-twentieth century was to have some education, but not enough that her knowledge could challenge or debate the knowledge of men. Instead a woman’s strengths should be centered on her “intuition, endurance, patience [making her] fit for domesticity and motherhood rather than professional or public life” (Weedon 7). While Kate certainly reads of more authors than the three she lists and she certainly thinks more things than she admits to, she isn’t willing to fault what the ideal woman should possess as redeemable traits. “The fear and hatred of our bodies has often crippled our brains. Some of the most brilliant women of our time are still trying to think from somewhere outside their female bodies—hence they are still merely reproducing old forms of intellection” (Weedon 26). A part of a woman’s submissiveness is not only a lack of knowledge of her sexual body, but also a performative standard that what she does know academically she should not be too proud of nor speak of too freely.

After a few months of wining and dining Kate stays the night at Eugene's house, and when he tries to make love to her two nights in a row, she breaks down in tears both times. Eugene is angry and frustrated at being unable to convince Kate that she would not burn in hell for the sexual act. The next morning while he is dropping her off at work he asks about books, "he had loaned them to me the previous night, before we went up to bed. One was a novel, and the other was called *The Body and Mature Behavior*" (O'Brien 235). This particular text was originally published in 1949 in London by Moshe Feldenkrais, and was not a text available for purchase in Ireland since it discussed social and sexual development from a neuro-psychological approach. Eugene must have purchased it on one of his many travels and O'Brien knew of it by living abroad. Kate never goes into what knowledge is found in this text. Yet it seems clear that O'Brien is making a point that a Protestant Irish man, Eugene, was trying to enlighten his Catholic country girl about the physical nature of the body, excluding the religious inferences that would have often accompanied a Catholic lecture. That is, assuming that a lecture would have ever been given in the way of sex, since it was considered an inappropriate subject to speak of.

While Kate and Eugene seem to be content in their relationship, Kate feels as though she has to defend it by stating, "Eugene guarded me like a child, taught me things, gave me books to read, and gave pleasure to my body at night" (O'Brien 323). In this statement Kate admits to her role as an active female submissive. She had not only stopped going to college so that she could spend more time with Eugene, but she admits to an imbalance of power in their relationship with him not only being her guardian and

teacher but also, in a sense, telling her what books to read. Foucault would argue that Kate's "manner of sensation, pleasure, and desire are sex-specific [and are] produced in the service of the social regulation and control of sexuality" (Butler 128). Kate may enjoy receiving pleasure at night, but Eugene guards and teaches her like a child and in Eugene's "social regulation" he controls Kate's sexuality, not only by being her only experience, but also being the only one to impart any sort of sexual knowledge to her.

While Kate may have escaped the rural patriarchal lifestyle she had been born into, she also found a close replication with the Protestant man that she marries. In this trilogy, Eugene Gaillard personifies the type of man that O'Brien has such a strong pull towards, "I used to anyhow, observe and be drawn towards men who seemed to me to have very strong elements of both [god and the devil], and who would exert power over one—over one's mind and over one's body" (Eckley 39). The power that Eugene has over Kate is something that O'Brien would have been familiar with.

In a sense, Eugene Gaillard (who shares his initials with O'Brien's ex husband) may have been a representation for the husband O'Brien divorced two years after *The Lonely Girls* was published, Ernest Gebler. There is also a striking age similarity between O'Brien and Gebler and Kate and Eugene. O'Brien was 18 when she met Gebler in Dublin while working as a pharmacist; Gebler was nearly twice her age. While the reader knows that Kate is 21 in *The Lonely Girls*, we only get glimpses of how old Eugene is in comparison. The marriages of both O'Brien and her lead character, Kate, are rushed. When O'Brien references her own marriage she states: "It was very hurried, and I didn't know the man very long, and it was really hastened by the fact that my family were

against it. I just did that thing that Victorian novels remind us of: I went from them, to him; from one house of control, to another" (Cooke). The same situation narrates Kate's life; she went from one house of control to another. One could argue that she did live with Baba on their own in Dublin in between, however, Baba's ability to subvert her gender expectations set her up as the authoritative figure in their companionship. Kate routinely followed whatever Baba wanted. Throughout the *The Country Girls Trilogy* Kate continually plays the role of the female submissive.

While much of O'Brien's life shows how she subverted her gender expectations, those subversions only occurred after her experiences with gender performativity and living up to the ideal of the female submissive. There are enough parallels between O'Brien's life and what her character Kate experiences, that one can deduce that O'Brien articulates her fiction from her life's experiences. It is these very experiences that spur O'Brien on in writing her fiction as she attempts to not only reconcile her self-exile from Ireland but also the otherness or alterity that she feels as a woman.

In the third novel of the trilogy, *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, the girls live in London with their husbands and the main point of view is Baba's and not Kate's. This allows the reader to experience the thoughts and actions of an Irish girl who was willing to subvert the gender expectations of her time period and also acknowledge the alterity of being a woman. Not surprisingly, this novel in the trilogy was written in the year O'Brien sought legal separation from her husband. A time that O'Brien would have especially felt the effects of subverting gender expectations and the alterity of a woman seeking legal custody of her children. While O'Brien's character, Baba, is in stirrups at the

gynecologist's office for her pregnancy, (not by her husband, but by a one-night stand with a Greek), she raves:

I was thinking of women and all they have to put up with, not just washing nappies or not being able to be high-court judges, but all this. All this poking and probing and hurt. And not only when they go to doctors but when they go to bed as brides with the men that love them. Oh, God, who does not exist, you hate women, otherwise you'd have made them different. And Jesus, who snubbed your mother, you hate them more. Roaming around all that time with a bunch of men, fishing; and Sermons on the Mount. Abandoning women. (O'Brien 473)

Baba addresses a God that she has a difficult time believing in and accuses Him of hating women, "otherwise you'd have made them different." Baba is not only afflicted by having the anatomy that requires the poking and prodding from doctors and husbands, but also by being different from men as she expounds about Jesus, who, "roaming around all that time with a bunch of men, fishing; and Sermons on the Mount. Abandoning women." Apparently, if women were made differently, Jesus would have spent more time with them. Baba would agree with Morgan's statement: "women are a colonized people. Our history, values, and (cross-cultural) culture have been taken from us –a gynocidal attempt manifest most arrestingly in the patriarchy's seizure of our basic and precious 'land': our own bodies" (Weedon 26). The alterity that Baba feels women experience stems from the patriarchal approach to society in that men are the norm, forcing women to be defined by their differences to men. The colonization that Baba feels stems from women's reproductive capability being governed by men's laws, medical and social practices. Weedon reinforces this notion with her studies of scientific writings during the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries:

In Western thought gender tends to be conceptualized as a set of polarized binary oppositions in which one term is privileged over the other. Such hierarchically structured discourses of gender value aspects defined as male over female, for example, reason over emotion, or activity over passivity. Moreover, theories of gender difference have most often been written from the perspectives that assume the white male to be the norm against which all others should be measured and which see all women as deviating from this norm in ways that fit them for both domesticity and motherhood. (Weedon 6)

The scientific writings from the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries still hold sway in some public opinion (such as the Irish Church and State) as to what is appropriate work for women. Baba recognizes this patriarchy in her society and how women were not only treated differently, but also treated as the “other.”

While Baba marries a man for money, she still holds the belief that women should be able to do better for themselves if only they would stand up for equal treatment. When Kate is going through her divorce from Eugene, she often apologizes over the phone to him and agrees that she should not be able to see their son as often because she is the one who left the marriage. When Baba hears these conversations, (as they often take place on her home phone) she thinks: “she was so goddamn servile I could have killed her. Telling him that he should have met a good woman, but that there was no such thing. Letting the sex down with a bang” (O’Brien 421). While Baba may despise God for not making women more different to be accepted, she also believes enough in her gender that there are good women and that women like Kate are the ones who discredit the gender by repeatedly playing the submissive role.

A sedimentation of gender norms produces the peculiar phenomenon of a ‘natural sex’ or a ‘real woman’ or any number of prevalent and compelling social fictions, and that this is a

sedimentation that over time has produced a set of corporeal styles which, in reified form, appear as the natural configuration of bodies into sexes existing in a binary relation to one another. (Butler 191)

Baba is infuriated by Kate's servile attitude towards her estranged husband because that same servile attitude serves as the "sedimentation of gender norms". Kate is repeating the gender performance that disenfranchises women as they accept their weakness as a "real woman". Even though Baba may still get beaten up by her husband from time to time, she is not afraid to stand up for herself or for her gender.

In another section Baba is informing her husband and his brother that she is going out with a friend, when they question her as to who she is going to see she notes the expression on her husband's brother's face, "the brother, that shark with the blood pressure, was giving me the eye, too, as much to say, 'We're powerful and you can't lie to us.' The vote, I thought, means nothing to women, we should be armed" (O'Brien 429). Her husband's brother does not lay a hand on her, but her husband had certainly shown his temper a time or two with a few black eyes. In Baba's opinion, continuing to vote in the patriarchs of society did little for women; instead they should be able to defend themselves against the violence of men by being "armed".

While O'Brien demonstrates in Baba's strong-willed character the ability to defy or subvert certain gender expectations, Baba also demonstrates what little power or mobility women had in the mid-twentieth century regardless of the right to vote or the ability to take college classes. The Irish woman still lived in a patriarchal society in which the man knew best.

O'Brien's fiction appeared about 10 years before second-wave feminism and before the alterity and fate of women could be openly discussed. Taylor effectively summarizes an argument made by Julia Kristeva when stating: "Perhaps the alterity of Woman is so horrifying that it cannot be spoken but only written, written by not writing it or by writing it indirectly" (Taylor 157). While O'Brien may not write all circumstances directly, she certainly does make points in her pieces indirectly concerning women's fates.

"There must be, in every man and every woman the desire, the deep primeval desire to go back to the womb. A man partly and symbolically achieves this when he goes into a woman. He goes in and becomes sunken and lost in her. A woman never, ever approaches this kind of security" (Eckley 30).

Some of O'Brien's work not only was concerned about the fate of women but also indirectly addressed gender subversive issues of homosexuality. In the stories, "The Mouth of the Cave" and "Sister Imelda" the reader is introduced to women who venerate relationships with other women rather than heteronormative relationships. Yet the relationships are not fully satisfied in that the women are not comfortable stepping outside of the heteronormative standard. "A woman, Wittig argues, only exists as a term that stabilizes and consolidates a binary and oppositional relation to a man; that relation, she argues, is heterosexuality. A lesbian, she claims, in refusing heterosexuality is no longer defined in terms of that oppositional relation" (Butler 153). While the women in both short stories come close to refusing heterosexuality, they still stabilize Wittig's binary heterosexual standard by not transgressing that standard. The two short stories also

have elements of secrecy since the women in these stories cannot publicly demonstrate what sort of relationship they desire.

In “The Mouth of the Cave” the protagonist takes a different path than she normally does to visit the village for some groceries and a drink. On the way there she comes across a younger woman who had been lying naked in the grass. The two women never speak, but the protagonist is so taken by the experience that she hurries home to have dinner for two and the house ready to receive a guest that she didn’t invite. The protagonist wonders at her own infatuation with the younger woman, “I thought, Why am I running, why am I trembling, why am I afraid? Because she is a woman and so am I. Because, because? I did not know” (O’Brien 174). The protagonist admits in her train of thought the idea of the two women being together was causing her fear. Yet her desire to have dinner with the other woman was so strong that she instructed her servant in all the specifics of the meal and had the outdoor table moved to a place under a tree. In her imaginings of the evening she divulges details that indicate an intimacy with the other woman:

I told the servant to lay a place for two. I also decided what we would eat, though normally I don’t in order to give the days some element of surprise. I asked that both wines be put on the table, and also those long sugar-coated biscuits that can be dipped in white wine and sucked until the sweetness is drained from them and redipped and resucked indefinitely. I would do everything to put her at ease. Get drunk if necessary. At first I would talk, but later show hesitation in order to give her a chance (O’Brien 174).

Even after the protagonist imagines the evening in intimate detail she realizes that the chances of the young woman arriving would be slim. Yet she waits until after dark before she begins eating the meal alone. The protagonist does not actively seek out the other

woman though she watches the younger women to see if one will approach. “She never gives me a sign as to which she is. I expect she is too frightened. In my more optimistic moments I like to think that she waits there, expecting me to come and search her out. Yet I always find myself taking the sea road, even though I most desperately desire to go the other way” (O’Brien 176). The protagonist understands her own fear of seeking out the other woman even though she desires to, and expects the other woman feels the same way.

The short story indicates that both women, though they have not spoken, will keep the knowledge of the other a secret. While O’Brien explores the possibilities of gender subversion in this text, she does not allow the desire to come to full fruition. Yet, gender subversion still exists in the little details, the character taking the walk lives alone and has a servant. She walks to the pub each day to drink and talk with the men and gets offended by the local Australian. She even had thoughts of another woman after seeing her naked. While this protagonist is not entirely an outcast, she certainly doesn’t fit the heteronormative standard of a female in Ireland. In this instance, the protagonist is living her life how she sees fit, which is also an indication that she is higher class in being able to have a servant and live how she pleases. Yet she also understands the importance of keeping some of her secrets so as not to be completely ostracized from society.

The individual’s presumption that they must keep the desire of another person a secret demonstrates her ability to perceive society’s constructions of gender. D.A. Miller phrases it best when he states: “Secrecy would seem to be a mode whose ultimate meaning lies in the subject’s formal insistence that he is radically inaccessible to the

culture that would otherwise entirely determine him” (195). Miller’s statement indicates that secrecy is necessary for people to maintain their identity or beliefs in a culture that would otherwise disagree with the secrets. The maintenance of secrets by the two women in the short story “The Mouth of the Cave” complies not only with Miller’s theory but also conforms with the gender constructions that were examined in *The Country Girls Trilogy*. While the reader of “The Mouth of the Cave” has an inside knowledge as to what the protagonist thinks and feels, the reader also perceives the sense of secrecy that the woman keeps about her want to see the younger woman again.

O’Brien’s short story, “Sister Imelda”, also follows a similar strain except that its setting is in a convent and the older woman is one of the teaching nuns. The story is the Bildungsroman type and told from the perspective of the student who is infatuated with the new nun. Again, the perspective of a young, innocent 14 or 15 year old girl who is just learning about the relationships between people.

I had no idea how terribly she would infiltrate my life, how in time she would be not just one of those teachers or nuns but rather a special one, almost like a ghost who passed the boundaries of common exchange and who crept inside one, devouring so much of one’s thoughts, so much of one’s passion, invading the place that was called one’s heart. (O’Brien 126)

The student admits in her own thoughts how much Sister Imelda means to her in “pass[ing] the boundaries of common exchange” and even lends the descriptors to the nun of her “devouring so much of one’s thoughts, so much of one’s passion” and “invading” the student’s heart. According to Butler’s analysis of Foucault and the homosexual environment of convents, “sexuality recapitulates the ambivalent structure of its production, construed in part as the institutional injunction to pursue the love of the

various 'sisters' and 'mothers' of the extended convent family and the absolute prohibition of carrying that love too far... an eroticized taboo" (Butler 135). The repression of sexuality in an environment that encourages love and understanding would be considered an eroticized taboo not only by Foucault, who argues that the repression of sex only creates more discussions about it, but by O'Brien, where girls learn to love one another as more than "sisters" and "mothers".

The relationship between nun and student was one that had to remain secret, not only because of gender subversion but also because of the nun's pledge to the Catholic Church. While Sister Imelda and the narrator would exchange gifts, they had to be sure that their relationship was nothing more than the appearance of a teacher's pet. On one afternoon when the Sister bakes the student a special tart the student reflects, "had we been caught, she, no doubt, would have had to make a massive sacrifice" (O'Brien 130). The student and the nun recognized the possible chastisement not only from the convent but the community if their relationship was found out. Both nun and student "agreed on the paranoid perception that the social world is a dangerous place to exhibit the inner self and on the aggressive precautions that must be taken to protect it from exposure" (Miller 203). The two break off their relationship before the school year comes to an end, agreeing that it was for the best if they did not raise any more suspicion than they already had. The nun and the student realize that a "social world is a dangerous place to exhibit the inner self" if the inner self does not comply with the heteronormative gender construction that is repeatedly performed by other members of society. The nun and student perform the act of secrecy in order to appear to still conform to the cultural

expectations of their gender while their intimate experiences with each other are those of gender subversion.

“O’Brien chronicled the constricting culture that warped women’s perceptions of themselves as sexual beings” (Jacquette 182).

The construction of gender roles is so pervasive throughout O’Brien’s short stories and novels that any perversion of the expectation is immediately an outcast. This is why the relationships between two women do not eventuate. One or both women back down and keep the intimate experiences a secret. Kate and Baba from *The Country Girls Trilogy*, on the other hand, mostly live up to the expectations of gender performativity with only the occasional subversive thought or action. Yet there is a striking comparison for all the women in both the trilogy *The Country Girls* and the two short stories. The narratives do not boast of satisfied, freedom loving women. Instead, as Bruce Arnold of *The Irish Times* wrote:

Edna O’Brien’s concern has been with the presentation of sex as a mixture of the furtive, the absurd, the inconsequential and the humorous adjunct to the human endeavor. It has rarely been a question about passion. It has been exhibitionistic. It has dealt with, or hinted at, sacrilegious sex, lesbianism, venereal disease, voyeurism, fetishism, and various other forms of sexual frustration. Her novels in this respect deal almost exclusively with sexual failure. (Eckley 13-14)

In *The Country Girls Trilogy* Kate divorces her husband Eugene and rarely gets to see her son. Baba gets pregnant by a Greek lover because her husband is impotent. The short stories represent women who venerate the homosocial relationship but are afraid of social ostracism. O’Brien’s concern for women’s fate comes across in her narratives as she

explores the possibilities and impossibilities of relationships that could satisfy a woman in such a socially constrictive setting. The absence of any sort of satisfactory relationship for these women is attributed to the double patriarchal society that they live in—they can only do so much as the submissive female. “At best, women are the bearers of a traditional ideology of love, nurturance, and domesticity; at worst, passive victims” (Jacobus 126). If the women in these narratives perform to the ideal of their gender, they will experience “love, nurturance, and domesticity” through raising their families. When these women fall short of performing their gender ideal, they are “passive victims” who cannot entirely control their own fate. A fate that concerns O’Brien, a woman with similar experiences, who wanted to demonstrate these concerns whether indirectly or directly through her narratives.

CHAPTER THREE: "IT'S AMAZING THAT CHILDHOOD REALLY OCCUPIES AT MOST TWELVE YEARS OF OUR EARLY LIFE... AND THE REST OF OUR LIVES IS SHADOWED OR COLOURED BY THAT TIME" (Eckley 79).

O'Brien's concern for women continued past the 1960s, and is still a central theme in her narratives that continue to be published. However, O'Brien began weaving Irish Catholic beliefs and Irish politics more strongly into her writing as it developed. O'Brien's confidence in taking on the patriarchal structure grew as not only second wave feminism started to take place, but also as her books became more and more accepted by a wider reading public. O'Brien had this to say about the start of her career, "you know, a bit of affirmation either from the family or the community helps a lot, especially when you start off. I had none. My own family, my mother and father, God rest them, were appalled" (Carlson 72). It should come as no surprise then that with greater acclaim for the kind of texts she was writing, that O'Brien would feel more comfortable in addressing religion and politics and their influence on female lives more directly in her narratives.

The next novel to be examined is *A Pagan Place*, a Bildungsroman narrative first published in 1970. It takes a look at the religious values held by a rural community and how they affect the sexuality and performativity of a young girl coming of age. The last novel to be examined is *Down by the River*; a Bildungsroman novel O'Brien wrote after the scandal of a 14-year old girl made the headlines in Ireland. Ultimately politics and religion decide whether or not she could obtain an abortion. Both tales narrate the lives of young women who are rudely introduced to sexuality without an education of it. The crude education instead comes from older men who force themselves on the girls; an occurrence that happened too often to young Irish women and concerned O'Brien deeply.

*A Pagan Place* is also a reconstruction of childhood memories of rural Ireland.

The novel, published in 1970, also received the *Yorkshire Post* Book of the Year Award and has such praise from fellow author, John Berger: “This reconstruction of a childhood experience, so far as I know, is unique in the English language... A book whose genius is memory”. O’Brien’s narratives typically do stem from her memories of Ireland, and while not all the plots have happened directly to O’Brien, one can deduce, especially from the *The Country Girls Trilogy*, that O’Brien and her characters have some parallels in their lives. When asked about her writing from memory, O’Brien replied:

If you write in a kind of personal tone, as I do, they assume without any shadow of doubt that everything in it happened to you. They don’t understand that the soul of a book like *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or even, to a lesser extent, *The Country Girls* springs from a fusion of fact, feeling and imagination. People are constantly asking, Is it autobiographical? I said, ‘Well, I’d be a goner now if I did everything I wrote’. (Carlson 73)

O’Brien certainly does write from memory, as we have seen with her attempts to reconcile alterity and the conditions of women, but she certainly does not write everything from her experience alone. While *A Pagan Place* reads as though it is entirely from memory utilizing the second person “you” to narrate the experiences, it cannot be expected that O’Brien is relating specifically her own childhood or anyone else’s.

The rural people in this child’s life contend with the conflicts between Catholic and Protestant faiths and the still present suspicions of Druids and Witches who use plants and stones to heal ailments that aren’t cured by traditional pharmaceuticals. *A Pagan Place* is a novel that explores a child’s memory of navigating the sacred and the secular in the Catholic belief system and the horrors of sexuality introduced by a person

of her religious institution. O'Brien's narrative tells of how a young girl places her trust in the Church as she is instructed—but is violated in the end in part because of the patriarchal system that is in place, and she is not allowed to question what it is that happened to her.

While the contentions between the various belief systems were very real in rural Ireland, Catholicism remained the prominent faith.

Before your first Holy Communion Jewel and you practiced receiving the Host. You received bits of paper from each other. You had to hold it for as long as possible, for as long as it was likely to take the body and blood of Jesus to melt into you. The bits of paper soaked up all your saliva but it was not a sin when they grazed your teeth whereas it would be a sin if the Host were to. That was your main preoccupation on your first Holy Communion day, even though you were being admired by all and sundry because of your finery. Your shoes were buckskin and your veil had sprays of lily of the valley wrought into it. Yours was the finest veil. Your mother saw to that. Our Lord didn't touch your teeth but there was a crisis afterwards. When Lizzie asked you to pose for a snap you stood against the railing and a corner of the veil blew up and got caught on a spear and would have been in shreds only that the priest rescued it. (O'Brien 8)

O'Brien weaves many details in with a simple telling of events. The protagonist's first expressed Catholic experience in the novel is that of the first Holy Communion. The event is significant because it is the first time that a young Catholic is able to fully participate in the whole ceremony of Mass. Prior to the first Holy Communion children must complete work on the stories of the Bible to fully understand and appreciate what Communion means for God's children, and during Mass they would not have been able to take part in the receiving of Communion. The first Communion is often seen as a memorable marker of maturation and the child not only receives gifts but lavish clothing

to be able to celebrate the ceremony. In O'Brien's description, "you were being admired by all and sundry because of your finery. Your shoes were buckskin and your veil had sprays of lily of the valley wrought into it. Yours was the finest veil. Your mother saw to that," indicates the importance of the ceremony, especially to the mother. Irish mothers had a stake in how their children were perceived, if the child was successful, it meant that the mother was successful, if the child turned out poorly, it meant that the mother had incorrectly raised her child. Jantzen phrases it best when she states "... the oppressiveness of Mary as the virgin mother: it is an impossible ideal that nevertheless seemed to justify contempt for real women and domination of them because they did not meet this 'perfect' standard" (296). If Mary the virgin mother was able to give birth and raise a child like Jesus, then obviously the Irish mother should aspire to do the same.

The protagonist's next significant experience with Catholicism is when she and her mother travel to a monastery where her father was sent to recover from his alcoholism. The protagonist wonders at the monks' vows of silence as they pass by the little family taking a tour of the monastery where her father had been staying for weeks. The monk that gives them the tour also feeds them lunch and gives the protagonist strawberries grown in the greenhouse. Yet "the moment the car drove off the monk lowered his head and put his cowl up and you took that to be an indication that he was retreating into silence again. You felt very sorry for him even though his life had all the serenity that your mother and father's lacked" (O'Brien 74). The character recognizes the sacrifice the monks make for occluding themselves from the outside world, yet is inspired by the peace they garner from their lifestyle.

What the protagonist has difficulty in understanding are the paganish tendencies that still survive in the Irish countryside. The character's first experience with the ideas of paganism occurs when O'Brien describes:

In the morning on the way to school, you saw things, tracks, fur, feathers, and once a paw with its long nails intact. You skirted the fort of dark trees. It was a pagan place and circular. Druids had their rites there long before your mother and father or his mother and father or her mother and father or anyone you'd every heard tell of. But Mr. Wattle said that was not all, said he had seen a lady ungirdled there one night on his way home from physicking the donkey. The ground inside was shifty, a swamp where lilies bloomed. They were called bog lilies. The donkey went in there to die and no wonder because the shelter was ample. No one would go in to bury it. It decomposed. The smell grew worse and worse and more and more rampant. The dogs carried the members around, the bits, big bones and little bones, and they were scattered everywhere and in the end were as brown and as odorless as twigs. (O'Brien 7)

The vivid description in this passage not only lends to the senses the smell of decomposition, the visual of dogs carrying around the bits of the dead donkey, but also the horror of the circle of dark trees. Druids had held their rites there before anyone the character knows had lived. The swamp had attracted a dying animal because of its shelter, but the protagonist almost makes the connection that the rites of the Druids had brought the dying donkey to decompose in their sacred space. An eerie event that the protagonist views with dread but also with awe at the power of the "fort of dark trees."

The dark trees aren't the only paganish experience that the protagonist experiences. In the novel O'Brien describes an elderly woman comparable to that of a witch who cured the protagonist's father of eczema.

It was there he contracted eczema and it stayed with him all his life and he had to get yellow ointment for it, from a woman who did

cures. She cured warts and fits and your mother said she would not like to get in her black books because she wouldn't be surprised if she was a witch. There was always smoke from her chimney and around her window, wraiths of it. At Mass she reeked of smoke and no one wanted to sit near her. She picked plants and gathered stones and when foraging she cackled to herself. She was a widow. (O'Brien 10)

The aura of mystery surrounding the widowed woman stems not only from her widowhood but also from her collection of plants and stones. The widow has an alternative knowledge that is not well known to those of the Catholic Church, and even though she attends Mass, people fear her and won't sit near her for fear of her being a witch. Jantzen makes the argument that widowed women were often accused of being witches because "these women would be the ones who would either be a drain on the resources of those who were involved in developing the economy, or else if they were actively trying to support themselves, they would be in competition with men in the economic structures" (Jantzen 273). While a widow gathering herbs to make ointments to heal others may have been natural—it became an economic struggle between the male physicians during the Middle Ages. Women, who were seen as morally and intellectually inferior, became the target for suspicious activity. What O'Brien shows in *A Pagan Place* is that those superstitions of widowed women still persisted, even to the point that no one would sit next to her in Mass.

While the poor widow woman was rumored to be a witch for potions and ointments to procure an economic means for herself; no character in the novel is suspicious of a woman named Hilda. Hilda is one of the only characters other than the doctor of the village who owns a car, and the protagonist's family considers it a great

honor whenever Hilda comes to visit them. Hilda is allowed to be eccentric, live as a widow and take up her own version of spiritualism as one of the richest people in the village. “Your father liked her. When she took up spiritualism he defended her. Hilda had got some books and a special roundtable to try and speak to her dead husband but most people said that as she hadn’t spoken a civil word to him when he was alive it was mere hypocrisy trying to talk to him when dead” (O’Brien 59).

Even in twentieth century Ireland money buys a woman her freedom for religious mobility. If the poor widow woman sold potions and spoke to the dead, she surely would have been named a witch, yet Hilda is able to experiment freely with spirituality and have men such as the protagonist’s father stick up for her. Hilda’s situation is probably assisted in that she lends the father money so that he can buy horses and race them. Hilda, in turn, is served by having the father and other men accept her variation of spirituality since she assists them financially.

The protagonist realizes that financial stability wasn’t in her future unless she married a rich man. She had to remain virtuous or else end up like her older sister, Emma, who became pregnant and had to live with a priest in Dublin until the baby was born and adopted. One evening she finds herself at the church after avoiding the advances of her cousin.

You had a vision. You were with Jesus on a mountain road and he wore a white robe and was performing miracles easily. You were his assistant, you were carrying his equipment. The sacristan came in and ordered you out of there, said she was about to lock up. It was so you wouldn’t clash with the young priest, who was home on holiday. She was without her glasses and had a clean smock on. She was struck on him. Everyone was struck on him. One woman had swooned. He wore no collar, had rented a car, and was a

connoisseur of table wines. His sermons were stunning. People were riveted. He was very partial to Mary Magdalene and went into rhapsodies about her hair and the ointment with which she anointed Jesus. (O'Brien 169)

The protagonist's vision foreshadows an event that occurs later in the book. The description of the priest is important, as it imparts to the priest a youthful, risk-taking personality in which he seemingly defies some of the traits of priesthood by not wearing a collar and relating stunning sermons about Mary Magdalene and the ointment with which she wished to anoint Jesus. Women were "struck on him" and his sexually ambiguous sermons involving ointment and Mary Magdalene's hair. For a young girl navigating her way through the secular and the sacred belief system of the Catholic Church, the protagonist's encounter with him is exhilarating and confusing.

The young priest takes the protagonist out for a ride in a houseboat, and merely informs her parents that he is doing so. The parents are delighted that the "virtuous" young priest has taken such an interest in their daughter that they do not suspect anything else might happen.

You were not afraid. It was an honor. You thought of him in his gold vestments and him in his cassock going through the village concealed from the raving of the swooning woman. When he opened his belt and you heard it clang on the table, you strained to sit up and you tried to impede him from opening the buttons because it was nakedness that you feared above all. He tried to part your knees, to prise them open, said it would be lonely for him, it would be unfriendly but you were petrified and you would not yield. He caught hold of himself and preened and elongated it and squashed it and treated it like it was dough. Never were you more incongruous, never were you more unnecessary. He caught hold of your knee and ground his face in it and swung out of himself and swore to his Maker that he was doing a heinous and a hideous thing and he strained and he writhed and he imprecated, and

begged for it to be all over, for his joy and his agony to end.  
(O'Brien 176-77)

The protagonist retains her virginity in the encounter with the young priest. While she began the experience unafraid and feeling honored he would choose to spend time with her, she could not go through with the loss of her virginity. Even after she denies him, she is overwhelmed with guilt that she may have tempted him and he with shame that she outlasted his sexual advances. The conclusion of this scene is highly contradictory to the church's teachings that were especially prevalent in the Middle Ages. Jantzen shows us that, "it was a commonplace of the Middle Ages that women were more lustful, more prone to physical weakness, more tied to their bodies in every way than were men. For a woman to be spiritual, therefore, required heroics beyond what would be necessary for a man" (Jantzen 193). In this scene from *A Pagan Place*, the protagonist's heroics outlasted the lust of a priest who had sworn himself to God.

The priest's act is a human one, experiencing temptation of the body and performing a sexual act. His apology to God expresses the priest's concern that he failed in his attempt to be more cerebral and therefore closer to God; maintaining the fidelity pact between himself and God as the husband of those who serve the Church. "Men were encouraged to imagine themselves as married to and hence in a loving relationship with God" (Eilberg-Schwartz 99). The priest's sexual act, which finished on the protagonist's knees, makes him feel as though he failed God with his infidelity and vulnerable in his masculinity. The priest succumbed to his bodily desires making him more effeminate in his marriage to the God he serves. Eilberg-Schwartz continues in his argument, "a homoerotic dilemma was thus generated, inadvertently and to some degree

unconsciously, by the superimposition of heterosexual images on the relationship between human and divine males” (99). By the human male being subservient to a divine male in a relationship analogized as a marriage, the human male’s masculinity is thus vulnerable to a fluctuation in its ability to repeat the actions necessary to instill the masculine gender construction.

Our protagonist matures quickly after her encounter with the young priest. She only has one year remaining at her local Catholic school (which places her at the age of twelve or thirteen) before nuns arrive and ask for recruits to the convents.

Then she got very down to earth and asked what was a vocation. She posed the question three times before answering it. She said it was no angel appearing in blinding splendor, it was something deeper than that, more inherent, a desire to serve Jesus, to love Jesus, to be the spouse of Jesus. She said to think of the opportunity of being militant for Christ, of being humble for Christ, of bringing pagans the happiness he merited for them. She said yes, it was a marriage to God, she admitted that most girls wished for a marriage to someone but in that union of God and woman there was something no earthly ceremony could compare with, there was constancy. (O’Brien 192-93)

The arguments the nuns present for coming to the convent are similar to the arguments that women used for centuries to validate their reasons why a life at a convent would be better spent than traditional marriage. For our protagonist’s experience, she had seen her father recover from alcoholism at a monastery and wondered at the serenity the monks had known. She had visited her sister at the priest’s house in Dublin where Emma had stayed while pregnant. She had also experienced the lust of a young priest the summer before, and had felt guilty for tempting him. According to the teachings of the church: “[Women’s] attractiveness to men was held to be virtually irresistible, women were seen,

like Eve, to be the occasion of men's downfall. For men to make spiritual progress, away from all the sinful fleshly pursuits to which women tempted them, they should therefore avoid the presence of women altogether if possible" (Jantzen 223). The argument for the ability to be more cerebral and therefore closer to God went both ways, men and women would not be tempted by the other's body if they experienced separation from the other.

Our protagonist's voluntary action to join the convent seems to follow the actions of a young woman who sees the value in women serving God and kept away from the lustful pleasures of men. She wouldn't see drunken men in a convent, she wouldn't get pregnant like her sister, and she would rarely have contact with lustful, young priests. Instead she would be following through with her previous vision in which she saw Jesus in a white robe and she served him by carrying his equipment. In this narrative, O'Brien uses religion as an escape for a young girl, who, as she came of age, learned of sexuality through first-hand experience with the priest, "it was nakedness that you feared above all" (O'Brien 177), and decided that life in a convent was less troubling than a life where she would be expected to marry and raise a large family.

*A Pagan Place* ends with the protagonist leaving in a car for Dublin, where she would spend the night in a convent before traveling on to Belgium. The only person to see her off is her father, her mother who she had been close to, remains hidden unable to say goodbye.

O'Brien's eloquent story telling of a young girl's childhood and her eventual admission to a convent wonderfully articulates the conflicting beliefs of Catholicism and the pursuant suspicions of paganism. The novel also demonstrates how the knowledge

and the pressures of each still had power to force “women who were determined not to marry and who wished to enter a life dedicated to God had little option other than to become nuns” (Jantzen 197). *A Pagan Place* demonstrates only one of the possible life stories of a twentieth century rural Irish woman who wanted to determine her own fate.

*A Pagan Place* challenged the censorship authorities by its open acknowledgement of sexuality of the older sister and of the young priest. The novel also portrays a father suffering from alcoholism. A disease that Irish authorities felt was a weakness of their countrymen. While Edna O’Brien did not intentionally write in the face of the censorship authorities, she felt obligated to write her version of what it was like for a young girl to grow up in rural Ireland.

“That’s my morality. That they shall not bring into the world someone who isn’t wanted, by them, and who certainly isn’t at the moment going to benefit from being alive” (Eckley 31).

In 1992 a legal case broke the airwaves in Ireland that would debate the topic of abortion. A 14-year old girl named “Mary Magdalene” by the press had been forced to return to Dublin after local authorities from her rural district found out that she had gone to London seeking an abortion. She was so ashamed at what had happened to her that the incriminating evidence had to be drawn out of her diary of how her own father had “hurt her”. The sensationalized legal battle to decide if she should be allowed to go to London or not divided a country as they struggled with their Catholic teachings and the morality of a young girl being the victim of her father’s incest.

The story affected O'Brien deeply and in 1996 she published a fictional narrative that explored what the young girl might have gone through. *Down by the River* addresses the controversial issue of abortions, incest, and the public spectacle made of a young girl's life.

The novel introduces us to Mary and her father James in the very first chapter. Mary is accompanying her father on a fishing trip. When the fish is hooked is when he takes after Mary:

Darkness then, a weight of darkness except for one splotch of sunlight on his shoulder and all the differing motions, of water, of earth, of body, moving as one, on a windless day. Not a sound of a bird. An empty place, a place cut off from every place else, and her body too, the knowing part of her body getting separated from what was happening down there. It does not hurt if you say it does not hurt. It does not hurt if you are not you. Criss-cross waxen sheath, uncrissing, uncrossing. Mush. Wet, different wets. O quenched and empty world. An eternity of time, then a shout, a chink of light, the ground easing back up, gorse prickles on her scalp and nothing ever the same again and a feeling as of having half-died. (O'Brien 4)

O'Brien paints a vivid picture of the horror that Mary felt during and after her father forced himself on her. This is not the only incident in which James violates Mary in the novel but comes brazenly early in the text (the incident beginning on page three).

O'Brien's timing of the incident allows the reader to feel an immediate empathy for what young Mary has endured and will continue to endure at the hands of her father. "He looked at her, a probing look, looked through her as if she were parchment and then half-laughed. 'What would your mother say ... Dirty little thing'" (O'Brien 5). The statement implies that he does not feel guilt or shame for what he has done, and almost blames Mary for being the dirty one, the Eve who enticed Adam to sin.

O'Brien also introduces the reader to the local anti-abortion activist early in the novel to demonstrate the prevalent shibboleth that was held in rural Ireland. Roisin is invited into the home of Noni, who puts on quite the spread of food for the guest from the city and the local women. Roisin speaks of the evils of abortion and brings pictures to horrify the ladies.

Sally, who is herself expecting a child and in no way prepared to hear about the slaughter of the unborn, wishes she had not come and wonders if she could go out. Rammed down their throats are the details of the tiny thing, when it starts to make a fist, suck its thumb, get hiccups, swim, do somersaults and even sneeze. It is making her queasy. Johnny was right. She should not have come. A baby was a mystery and it should be left so. (O'Brien 16)

“A baby was a mystery and it should be left so” is a common perception amongst those who are kept from literature containing reproductive or contraceptive information for decades. When the Republic of Ireland was still forming itself, a law came into effect known as the Encyclical *Casti Connubii* (1930). This law stated: “... any use whatsoever of matrimony exercised in such a way that the act is deliberately frustrated in its natural power to generate life is an offense against the law of God and of nature, and those who indulge in such are branded with the guilt of a grave sin” (Bourke 200). The law itself stipulates that only sexual acts are conceived in matrimony—and that if any barriers are utilized to “deliberately frustrate” this generation of life then the people themselves must accept their acts of sin. This law came into effect after condom usage became widespread after the Industrial Revolution. A later amendment to the law would dictate that patients who wanted to receive condoms and spermicides would first have to see their doctor for a prescription and then a pharmacist may or may not fill the script according to their belief

system. “Between the state and the individual, sex became an issue, and a public issue no less; a whole web of discourses, special knowledges, analyses, and injunctions settled upon it” (Foucault 26). Sex was no longer an act between two people, the Church and State had to have their say in how people conducted themselves, and thus the regulations are enforced by law, which Foucault argues “power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself (86). In this case, the power of Church and State is masked by the orderly laws it utilizes to control the interactions of its people, and in Ireland, this also involved the sexual acts between two people.

Obviously, the heads of government and their religious influences did not care for contraception being available to the people. “A baby was a mystery and it should be left so,” illustrates that the less is known about reproduction, the more control the government and its religious influences have over the reproduction of children. Jacqueline sums it up best when she states:

Women’s sexuality became one of the primary tenets of patriarchal domination, co-opting the female’s power of reproduction in the quest for male hereditariness. What began as a private act between two people escalated into social, political, and cultural realms that remain controversial today. The role of woman in society gradually came to involve her sexuality. (156)

Patriarchal domination required that female sexuality be kept a mystery to women so that men could control the hereditary traits of the hierarchical structure. Knowledge of reproduction gives power to the person who knows how it works. This belief goes back to Adam and Eve, who used to roam the Garden of Eden naked until they ate the forbidden fruit and realized that they were naked. This knowledge of their sexuality is why they were expelled from the Garden of Eden and “both Adam and Eve are punished in ways

that make them human. Eve is condemned to continual sexual desire and childbearing, differentiating her from animals, which go into heat on a periodic cycle. And unlike animals, Adam must earn his food through the sweat of his brow. Humanness is thus a mixed blessing” (Eilberg-Schwartz 89-90). From the beginning, the patriarchal Church instructs how both man and woman must not try to know too much for while we are like God, we should not attempt to be him. This is especially true for women, in a patriarchal culture who have little to no knowledge of their reproductive capabilities because the knowledge of sexuality was considered sinful since Adam and Eve.

Sally is not only sickened by the details of what the baby gradually learns in the womb, however, as Roisin instills shock and fear into the women.

Roisin is holding up two pictures, two contrasting pictures, a contented baby, curled up in a womb, and a torn baby, its body mangled, pools of black blood in the crevices and in the empty crater of its head. Arms go up, forearms go up which Roisin pulls aside, forcing them to look, to witness the butchery done in England and elsewhere by a clique of killers. (O’Brien 16-17)

The shock and fear of the women are important for Roisin and other anti-abortion activists as it was common, secret knowledge that young Irish women who were in trouble would often disappear to London for a few days to abort an unwanted baby.

In the novel, *Down by the River*, O’Brien acknowledges this commonly held secret when one of the judges on Mary’s case is being pressed by his daughter to let Mary travel to England. Her father, the judge, responds with “Why the hell did the girl come home?” (O’Brien 242.) The judge is referring to the time in the book when a neighbor, Betty, figures out that Mary has been impregnated by her father and takes her to London for the procedure. Noni, the nosy neighbor and woman who invited Roisin into her home

to scare her rural neighbors, figures out what Betty and Mary are doing and calls the local Guard on them. Betty and Mary have to return home before the operation otherwise, Betty would have faced criminal charges. Yet even one of the five judges who were to hear the case about the little Mary Magdalene wished that the procedure had just taken place in London. According to the same judge when speaking with another judge, “our country will not recover from this... Our Attorney General opened a right can of worms” (O’Brien 252). He knows that whatever decision is made, there will be a large amount of people divided on the issue of abortion.

While O’Brien’s narrative is simply imagining what the conversations were that took place between the judges who ultimately made the final decision that they could not restrict Mary’s travel; she is a pro-choice sympathizer who would have supported the real Mary Magdalene in the 1992 case to be able to dispatch of her incestuous pregnancy. When asked about the Irish Supreme Court’s decision to rule in favor of the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child, which refused women access to information on abortion, O’Brien replied:

It’s tragic. Little do they know it’s also a potential form of murder. Murder to the lives of women who are already born and trying to live their lives. The zealots never take into account the penalizing due to poverty and exhaustion that arises from having large families—the unhappiness for the mother, the damage that redounds on the children. They don’t take that into account. I don’t think much of Pope John Paul II’s opinions; he may be a charming man and a great traveler, but he’s a dogmatist. Women’s lot is hard anywhere, but an Irishwoman’s lot is ten times harder. (Carlson 77)

O’Brien’s referral to an “Irishwoman’s lot is ten times harder” again references her concerns about the fate of women. In *Down by the River*, O’Brien illustrates the way

women were still thought of and treated in the 1990s, three decades after she began writing about the possibilities and impossibilities of women's fates and how they were still perceived as the "other".

In a scene where the father, James, is visiting with his friend, Jacko, they discuss horses and women. "I'll tell you where the money is now ... Being a woman, lying on your back and having kids, kids galore ... Unmarried mothers fleecing this country ... The more they have the more dole they're given ... Up near me there's a Dutch woman in a mobile home ... Six kids ... Two live-in men ... Both of them hammering her" (O'Brien 71). Apparently if the mother of the six children had been married, Jacko would not have minded her receiving benefits from the government. However, since she had two live-in men and was not married, she did not fit the heteronormative standard of being the submissive female in a marriage and that in of itself denigrates her reputation. However, being a Dutch woman, she probably did not realize or did not care to conform to the gender standards that had been constructed in Irish society.

The Dutch woman also would not have known of the shame that came with being an Irish woman. When asked who the father of her baby was, Mary refused to speak. She was so ashamed at what had happened to her that she could not even claim victim of her father's lust.

Confession frees, but power reduces one to silence; truth does not belong to the order of power, but shares an original affinity with freedom: traditional themes in philosophy, which a 'political history of truth' would have to overturn by showing that truth is not by nature free—nor error servile—but that its production is thoroughly imbued with relations to power. (Foucault 60)

According to Foucault's argument, the ability to confess should be freeing. Yet in the case of Mary and her patriarchal relationship with her father, the power structure does not allow her to overcome defying her father's wishes; even though she knows her father's wishes to be wrong and to have caused her harm. Several anti-abortion activists took the shame-filled silence as evidence of Mary's rape as well. Yet their perspective of the pregnancy was:

Did she realise the miracle that had happened, that it was that thing, the little life growing in the depths of her body, which brought the truth to light, the whole sordid business of rape, that the little life was the saviour and that it would also save the rapist, because all rapists long for the day when somebody would find them out and put a stop to what they know to be shameful but which they cannot control ... It was part of God's design, and Mary must see that too, see the pregnancy as a solution and not a problem, as a gift from God. (O'Brien 152)

The anti-abortion activists want Mary to come forward with the information of who raped her, stating that the pregnancy was a gift from God in order to free the rapist from his crimes. What must be noted is that the baby is the "savior" for the rapist. The anti-abortion activists, who, in this text, are all women, do not consider the consequences that the incident has had or will continue to have on 14-year old Mary's life if she does give birth to this child. "Following Simone de Beauvoir, most feminine critics of religion have argued that in a culture and society which defines men as the norm, women's otherness results in the devaluing of women's bodies and experiences" (Eilberg-Schwartz 20). In this particular incident in the novel, Mary's body and experiences are devalued and the focus is placed instead on the fetus growing inside her. In fact, the majority of the legal

battle is not to find the man who raped a minor, but instead to prevent her from traveling to England to prevent her from aborting the resulting pregnancy.

Yet young Mary does not find the pregnancy a gift nor can she admit to who impregnated her. She is terrified of either having the child or aborting the child and one evening writes a letter to the baby, “I don’t hate you, you know I don’t. If only you were my sister or my brother but not my child. If you could be spirited out of me that would be all right, more than all right. It is just that I cannot bear you. I am asking your soul to fly off now and wait for the right mother. But I know that cannot be” (O’Brien 237).

Through Mary’s letter, O’Brien acknowledges the difficult decision that females have to make when they are not ready to care for a child. In O’Brien’s words, “No woman is overjoyed to have abortion but if she must have it, she should not be made to feel like a criminal. It’s a serious and traumatic thing for a woman, and she needs support, not cudgels” (Carlson 77). One could argue in the Mary Magdalene case that it was especially traumatic for a 14-year old girl to have to consider the possibility of abortion after forced incest.

As for James, her father, there is the patriarchal hierarchy in which he exhibits little shame for his actions toward his daughter until they are publicly known. After the first incident he almost looks through Mary and says, “What would your mother say ... Dirty little thing” (O’Brien 3). Every incident thereafter he expects that Mary will comply with his forceful actions and that she won’t tell anyone else because he is her father. While she keeps her silence until the end, her diary does not and when he is found out, James hangs himself. Until that time, however, he takes advantage of Mary and of being

the patriarch of the family. “In [the] imagination, the father’s nakedness was connected with shame when the father was the passive object of someone’s gaze. A father was not dishonored if he intentionally exposed his nakedness. It was his prerogative to do so,” (87) Eilberg-Schwartz explains how in patriarchal society that a man who “intentionally exposed his nakedness” does not feel shame but only ensures his position in the hierarchy. If a man is the passive object of someone’s gaze—then he would feel shame. While it may be a stretch to extend this philosophy to James, Mary’s father, he still intentionally exposes “his nakedness” and expects for his daughter to remain obedient to him even as he wrongs her. In the case of patriarchy, James does not feel ashamed because he is the father of the family and the one the women submit to—Mary plays the part of the submissive female not only as his child, but as the sexually receptive female.

The patriarchal hold on Mary is similar to the hold on the protagonist in *A Pagan Place* in which the protagonist never betrays the young priest who masturbated next to her and came on her legs. She does not tell anyone of the incident but instead volunteers for assignment to a convent in order to find the serenity that she had seen the monks and nuns possess. Perhaps if Mary Magdalene of *Down by the River* had been able to stay at her convent instead of coming home to take care of her father after her mother passed away, she could have avoided playing a central role in Ireland’s debate on abortion.

O’Brien’s fictive retelling of the tragic story of the real Mary Magdalene of 1992 demonstrates that women still experienced disenfranchisement at the end of the twentieth century. Mary’s life nor experience were considered in the trial that would have decided whether she had to remain in Ireland or be allowed to travel to England to end her

incestuous pregnancy; the legal battle revolving around her unborn fetus instead. O'Brien continues to write about women's fates because she sees that they are still in the hands of the double patriarchal system.

CONCLUSION: “DERRIDA’S POINT IS THAT WHAT HAS BEEN PRESENTED AS A DICHOTOMY IN WESTERN THOUGHT, SUCH AS MAN/WOMAN, IS IN FACT MERELY A DIFFERENCE WHICH HAS BEEN MANIPULATED INTO A HIERARCHY” (Weedon 23).

O’Brien’s bravery in choosing self-exile in order to write when women were not supposed to have a voice enforces the importance and timing of O’Brien’s texts. They influence how women view themselves, their relationships and also brought attention to Irish women’s fates.

O’Brien’s ability to leave Ireland with her “pity for a land so often denuded, pity for a people reluctant to admit that there is anything wrong. That is why we leave. Because we beg to differ. Because we dread the psychological choke” (O’Brien 127) demonstrates that while O’Brien feels for her homeland and her native people, she does not agree to conform to their socially constricting society. Therefore, she feels that it is necessary to relocate to be able to fully explore her alterity as a woman.

“The naturalistic effect of heterosexualized genders are produced through imitative strategies; what they imitate is a phantasmatic ideal of heterosexual identity, one that is produced by the imitation as its effect” (Butler 127). This imitation is part of what drove O’Brien out of Ireland, women and men were supposed to imitate the appropriate heterosexual identity in order to be socially accepted. O’Brien could not conform to the ideal gender standard and instead left because women were “not supposed to write. (A) she’s supposed to keep her thoughts to herself. And (B) she’s supposed to be doing maternal, domestic, useful things; not things that are the provenance of man”

(Carlson 75). One of the important pieces of knowledge that was considered the “provenance of man” was reproduction and knowledge of nakedness.

“In [the] imagination, the father’s nakedness was connected with shame when the father was the passive object of someone’s gaze. A father was not dishonored if he intentionally exposed his nakedness. It was his prerogative to do so” (Eilberg-Schwartz 87). In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve become aware and ashamed of their nakedness and create clothing to cover themselves. When God realizes that they have acquired this knowledge about themselves, he banishes them from the Garden of Eden. When the Priest in *A Pagan Place* exposes himself to the protagonist, he is refused and completes the sexual act alone, allowing himself to become “the passive object of someone’s gaze”. He creates vulnerability in not only his masculinity, but also in his position as a priest of the Catholic Church. When James, the father of Mary in *Down by the River* intentionally exposes his nakedness to Mary, he is not ashamed because “it was his prerogative to do so”. In the power relationship between Mary and James, Mary continued to be the submissive of the patriarch, not only as daughter but as the sexually receptive female.

The sexuality of women and their ability to give birth attributes to their being controlled so that men can maintain control on their hereditariness. “Sexuality is tied to devices of power; the arrangement that has sustained it is not governed by reproduction; it has been linked from the outset with an intensification of the body—with its exploitation as an object of knowledge and an element in relations of power” (Foucault 107). The exploitation of knowledge is demonstrated in several places in O’Brien’s

narratives. Women are frequently kept in the dark about their own reproductive capabilities, in this way, they are more likely to be submissive to their husbands and to reproduce large families “in a stimulating atmosphere of poverty, chastity, and obedience” (Minutes 12).

O’Brien demonstrates this exploitation of knowledge when Kate receives the book *The Body and Mature Behavior* from her Protestant lover, Eugene. Until then, Kate had not received any information about sex and she was 21 years of age. She believed that a couple had to be married for a while before the woman was given a baby. In *A Pagan Place*, the protagonist has little understanding of what is happening next to her with the priest, but she does know that the unbuckling of the pants terrifies her and she feels the most insignificant that she has ever felt while he finishes the sexual act alone. In *Down by the River*, a pregnant Sally attends the anti-abortion activists gathering and wishes that she had not because “a baby was a mystery and it should be left so” (O’Brien 16). In a patriarchal system it only made sense that women should not know of their own sexuality. Since the eighteenth century, “scientific theories of difference were used to justify women’s exclusion from higher education and public life” (Weedon 7). Instead, the shibboleth persisted in that women were expressly built to be mothers and to take care of the domestic duties. There was no reason for women to be educated--even about their own bodies. “To ignore the social significance of bodies for both patriarchy and racism is to fail to address many aspects of women’s lives and the structural power relations which continue to govern them” (Weedon 16). O’Brien did not ignore the social significance of

women not having this knowledge of their bodies and therefore kept from making choices that could significantly impact their reproductive lives.

O'Brien was an advocate of women having more choices than being restricted to the home or the convent. She struck out against the gender performativity ideal of how a woman should act and demonstrated through several of her characters their own subversions to the ideal heteronormative standard. Baba and Kate live in London by the third novel in *The Country Girls Trilogy*. Little Mary Magdalene knows that she cannot raise a child that had been created by her and her father and braves a trip to London and a court trial in order to procure her freedom of choice. At the age of 14, the protagonist in *A Pagan Place* takes an opportunity to study at a convent in Belgium, since at that age it was either that choice or working on her parents' farm until she married.

The women in the short stories, "The Mouth of the Cave" and "Sister Imelda" express the desire for alternatives that did not exist in heteronormative Irish society, otherwise they would have faced social ostracism for denying the ideal performative standards of a woman. O'Brien writes about the fate of women in her texts because she herself strains against the limitations that were imposed on her by the double patriarchal society that she grew up in.

Eight years after O'Brien published her first novel the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women requested that the Irish government set up a National Commission on the Status of Women to research and recommend what could make women's lives better. The United Nations Commission probably did not use O'Brien's texts as a reference, but the knowledge of women's lives that were made

known through her narratives probably inspired a global agency to get involved in Irish women's lives.

When asked why an Irish woman's lot is ten times harder than another woman's, O'Brien responded:

Irish men do not give their wives the kind of companionship that matters. Many Irish women are still in fear and trembling of their men. I spend a lot of time in America, and there it's almost reversed. American men are terrified of their wives. American women are so much more predatory. I don't recommend that either. Balance is all; the balance that comes through a mutual understanding, which in turn comes from education. Education is not statistics or computers; it's knowledge and self-knowledge. A bit of Buddhism would do this country a power of good. (Carlson 78)

O'Brien only wants for women to have the same power, mobility and decision making ability that men have—but in a double patriarchal society that balance is difficult to achieve. The comparison to American women is an interesting one as some would say American women have become predatory because it is their way of rising up against the patriarchal standards that are in place. For example, nearly every legislative session American women still have to fight for their reproductive rights. Most recently, a class action lawsuit was filed against one of the largest American corporations for its gender wage gap and the lack of promoting females to higher positions. One could also argue that American women are more predatory because they have access to the education that is knowledge and self-knowledge that empowers them. Perhaps once this same education is made available to Irish women, a balance between the sexes can be achieved. Until then, O'Brien will continue to be concerned about the fates of women and will write her narratives as long as she is able.

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