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IRISH, CATHOLIC, AND FEMALE --

THE VISION OF PATRIARCHY IN THE FICTION OF EDNA O'BRIEN

by

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

> "Irish? In truth I would not want to be anything else . . ." (O'Brien, Mother Ireland 144)

In Mother Ireland, Edna O'Brien writes:

> Irish? In truth I would not want to be anything else. It is a state of mind as well as an actual country. It is being at odds with other nationalities, having a quite different philosophy about pleasure, about life, about death . . . (144)

and, she might have added, "about women." For the women in Edna O'Brien's fictional landscape are inhabitants of alien terrain, set apart not only geographically but also psychologically.

Edna O'Brien, a contemporary Irish Catholic writer, explores the complex interrelationship of the personal and the public, of women and Ireland. She presents women living under and reacting to the society created for them by a patriarchal system that dominated Ireland for most of its history. Her realistic characters are drawn from rural Irish life where traditions remain unaltered by the passage of time. The lives of mothers, sisters, wives, and children are chronicled with a poignancy and recognition of the loneliness and desperation that pervaded their lives. Although men, too, suffered under the patriarchal system, O'Brien's primary mission in her short stories and novels is to present the female perspective of

life in Ireland, a narrative absent from most of Irish literature until the twentieth century. She says:

> What I am about is a bit of magic and I do not want to write tracts or read them. I have depicted women in lonely, desperate and often humiliating situations, very often the butt of men and almost always searching for an emotional catharsis that doesn't come. (Roth 40)

In particular, O'Brien reveals the lives of Catholic women, trapped in a double patriarchal system of Church and State. It is not a pleasant portrayal. Her women's natural desires for happiness, success, and especially love (both spiritual and sexual) are thwarted, very often tragically, by a system -- actually two interrelated ideologies -- that seeks to control and dominate. And many of her characters cooperate in their own self-destruction because there is no collective opposition, no collective consciousness to offer an alternative for the repressive environment. Priests, nuns, mothers, fathers (very often absent), all the representative paradigms that children look to for guidance and support, uphold the traditions that were fostered in their development. Under a patriarchal system, women are "silenced, erased, confined, colonized" (Munich 256). Any woman in Edna O'Brien's fictional world who attempts to break away from the bonds of patriarchy is punished severely. Exile, loneliness, and even death are retributions for defying the acknowledged order.

O'Brien's women inhabit a landscape that is at once idyllic and deadening. Ireland has been described as:

> A people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and

> devoted their leisure time to the things of the spirit. A land whose countryside would be bright with cozy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with sounds of industry, the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths, the laughter of comely maidens, whose firesides would be the forums of the wisdom of old age. (Carlson 9)

Even to the present day this illusory vision of Ireland persists in literature and travel brochures. Ireland is infused with the aura of myth and majesty. However, O'Brien does not so much shatter the illusion of a beautiful, pastoral countryside -- rural Ireland -- as present the reality that exists within the picturesque cottages and isolated farm communities. "The typical landscape described in unusual detail is rough and desolate" (Kilroy 19). O'Brien's women do not concern themselves with the public. They are not involved in politics, nationalism or the Irish state. Nor are they members of communities of women -- women helping women. They are definitely not cosmopolitan, living in Dublin and protesting the inequities of existence in a male dominated society. In general, they are not highly educated women breaking social boundaries and creating their own lives. Instead, her characters are isolated, passive country girls relying on their limited and sheltered experience to combat the modern world. Inevitably, they cannot escape the indoctrination of the past. "Her heroines are always getting away - from the farm to Dublin, from Dublin to London, and so on - as she did herself, but they remain haunted and contained by their origins" (Sage 85).

Even in O'Brien's novels that have settings beyond the shores of Ireland, such as Casualties of Peace and The High Road, her adult women struggle with the echoes of the past as they attempt to negotiate the present. The message is clear: women do not escape their Irish heritage; instead, it is their invisible but ever present companion silently exerting its will. Whether the characters inhabit the Irish landscape or London or the south of France, they cannot expel their roots nor find peace in existence. The elements of the romance novel -- handsome heroes to the rescue, love conquers all, and happy endings -- are not present in O'Brien's fictional realm. The most one can hope for is a recognition and a resignation, a coming to terms with the inevitable, a living out of an unfulfilled life.

> They are threatened by madness because they can find no enduring place in that world and they have no values of an older time to fall back upon. They have been deceived by the possibilities of love and life holds no other meaning. (Carr iv)

The skill with which Edna O'Brien creates her characters reflects an intimate and personal knowledge of the people and landscapes she explores. And it is true that O'Brien's roots are deep within the rural Irish countryside. She was born in Tuamgraney, County Clare, a village of two hundred people, in the 1930's. Even today one is struck by the solitude and isolation of this tiny Irish hamlet. A silent, narrow road with houses on both sides, several ancient churches and a nondescript crossroads are all that interrupt the endless

vista of green fields and pastures -- the Ireland of the travel poster. At a recent reading of her novels at the Folger Library, O'Brien explained the influence of this community on her life. "County Clare affected me totally. I was affected geographically -- haunted by its ancestral quality. There was the cultural and religious reality. It [the country] was not intellectual." Surrounded by the stark beauty of nature and the stifling atmosphere of a contained and rigid agrarian society, Edna O'Brien led the traditional life of the country girl that she would later incorporate into her fiction.

She was the fifth child of Michael and Lena O'Brien. Her father was a farmer, and her mother made rugs in her free time. O"Brien commented:

> You see, my own father was what you might call the "archetypal Irishman - a gambler, drinker, a man totally unequipped to be a husband or a father. And of course that colored my views, distorted them, and made me seek out demons. (Guppy, "The Art of Fiction" 255)

Speaking about her mother, O'Brien foreshadows the heroine of many of her stories: "I think my mother was exhausted, spent. She was a woman of considerable ambition, which she hadn't realized . . . But I think her life was more than she could bear" (McQuade 48). The patriarchal values of the Church and State were dutifully instilled in O'Brien and she was a willing participant, absorbing the doctrines and myths of her ancestors. In an interview entitled "Edna O'Brien's Magic," the author speaks about her childhood:

> I never had books as a child. We had no books at all

> in the environment where I grew up. It was typical of the whole culture. (30)

O'Brien's statement about the dearth of books in her community is not quite accurate since the Church provided ample reading materials in the form of religious tracts and lives of the saints. " . . . I read the prayer books which are saturated with lyric language. And I read the gospels" (McQuade 49). The irony in O'Brien's writing is the fact that the very patriarchy that she exposes and condemns gave her the lyrical training in language that permeates her fiction. Much of her indoctrination into the proper role of the Irish woman in Catholicism occurred during her school years at the Convent of Mercy at Loughrea in County Galway. O'Brien would later dissect her experience in the convent in her memoir Mother Ireland. Writing about O'Brien's childhood, Darcy O'Brien [no relation] comments, "Edna O'Brien's childhood truly was innocent in the sense that it was protected from urban artifice and that it fostered more than most the clear-cut beliefs in good and evil, truth and falsehood, love and hate" (181). It was only when she left the stifling and parochial atmosphere for Dublin and the Pharmaceutical College of Ireland that she was able to reflect, dissect and reveal the lives of the silent woman she left behind. And why did an obviously talented writer such as O'Brien attend a pharmaceutical college instead of studying literature? Her answer, in an interview entitled "The Art of Fiction" in the Paris Review, reveals the depth of the influence of her

acculturation:

> My family was radically opposed to anything to do with literature. Although Ireland has produced so many great writers, there is a deep suspicion about writing there. Somehow they know that writing is dangerous, seditious, as if "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." I was an obedient little girl - though I hate to admit it now! - and went along with my family's wishes. I worked in a chemist's shop and then studied at the Pharmaceutical College at night. (244)

In spite of this acculturation, she was able to overcome the stifling, rural atmosphere of County Clare by moving to Dublin. There, she was able to escape the physical bonds of place, and began to speak for the unspoken, to become one of the first writers in Ireland to give the rural, Irish Catholic women an authentic voice, to pull them out of the margins of literature and place them into the illumination of the full, unabridged text. "She had described a kind of girl's life that hadn't been talked about before" (Woodward 51).

In order to accomplish this revelation of the submerged Ireland, Edna O'Brien had to transform and invent herself as a woman writer. There were no predecessors for her to use as a guide as she negotiated the world of fiction. She said in a Publisher's Weekly interview, "There wasn't any tradition of writing or particularly of a woman writer" (36) -- especially a Catholic, woman writer. As Mary Gordon would agree about O'Brien years later, "She had no literary predecessors, this Catholic, female, literary migrant" (183). In Twentieth Century Authors - A Biographical Dictionary of Modern

Literature published in 1942, out of 1850 citations of published authors less than 300 were women and only three were Irish women (Kate O'Brien, and Edith Somerville and Violet Ross).

Edna O'Brien forced her readers to peer beyond the emerald green hills, the innocent children, the contented mothers to the Ireland of limitations 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.

Although O'Brien has incorporated many of her memories and experiences into her fiction, it would be simplistic to say that her work is purely autobiographical. Rather, she begins with her memories of childhood -- memories she readily admits she can never escape -- and reshapes them to develop an emotional theme, recounting the tales in lilting and melodious language. Her ties to the past are in keeping with the traditions of Irish literature which "has looked deep into the individual dissecting the shaping years of childhood and laying bare the dreams, ideals and psychological pain of adulthood" (O'Brien-Johnson 184). However, O'Brien absorbed more than the patriarchal traditions from her Irish roots. She is a storyteller with the unique gift of transcending the pedestrian narrative through the power of imagistic language. What elevates her often bitter stories of desolate and inconsolable women above the maudlin and ordinary grind of

melodrama is the use of language -- sometimes stark and savage and other times lush and sensual. Her power of lyricism projects the simple humanity and plight of her characters, touching the reader's depth of emotions.

Her stories do not depict heroines engaged in epic and daring adventures. Rather the narratives emphasize the commonplace -- the non-event, the record of daily activities. A conversation, a description of a barren field at dawn, the setting of the tea table, the unhappiness generated by a seemingly insignificant incident that sometimes leads to tragedy are all given increased emphasis and intensity through O'Brien's Irish sensibility of language. In truth, everyday scenes are the touchstone of the author's work. "Her domestic interiors and inventories, in particular, marvelously evoke the emotional squalor of setting for survival" (Sage 88). And through these deceptively simple settings, O'Brien fulfills her vision of fiction.

> So what I want most in fiction is the spiritual thrust, the moment or sequence of moments that shifts the boundaries to something larger, familiar and also startling, to the brush with God and nature or the absence of God and nature. (O'Brien, "Bad Time for Emotions" 20)

Language and narrative combine to provide a vision of women who are part of a social construct. They are manipulated and formed by forces over which they have no control but which will shape and haunt their entire lives. Edna O'Brien's fiction reflects Elaine Showalter's theory of Gynocritics, a term defined as:

> A theory of culture [that] incorporates ideas about women's body, language, and psyche but interprets them in relation to the social contexts in which they occur. The way in which women conceptualize their bodies and their sexual and reproduction functions is intricately linked to their cultural environments. The female psyche can be studied as the product or construction of cultural forces. ("Feminist Criticism," Critical Inquiry 197)

O'Brien herself confirms Showalter's concept when she states, "Society and the environment and the education that comes our way is so decisive in the forming of us" (Eckley 37). Certainly, the double patriarchal construct of the Irish State and Catholic Church creates and influences Irish women's perceptions of themselves, their actions, and their place in society. So one female writer forges ahead, escapes the bonds of the patriarchal influences that have silenced so many for so long and describes the plight of those she left behind in County Clare.

Edna O'Brien's first novel, The Country Girl, was published in England in 1960 and was immediately condemned in Ireland for its realistic portrayal of Irish womanhood. The escapades of the two "country girl" heroines -- Kate and Baba -- were shocking enough, but then O'Brien ventured into forbidden territory, the explicit depiction and discussion of sex. Naturally, the patriarchal leadership in Ireland was outraged. The subject of sex was a deep-seated taboo and revelations about sexuality and pleasure surrounding the procreative act were condemned as mortally sinful. O'Brien shattered the silence and, as a result, her novels were banned

in Ireland by the Irish Censorship Board.

Why was the reaction so vehement? O'Brien offered her own assessment in Censorship in Ireland. When asked, "What kind of image of women do you think people wished to see in Ireland?" She responded, 'The pedestal image: devoid of sexual desires, maternal, devout, attractive. Quite a handful!'" (75). She was aware of her novel's impact:

> I offended several fashions. I offended the Catholic Church. I betrayed Irish womanhood. They even used that phrase - I was a "smear on Irish womanhood." I betrayed my own community by writing about their world. I showed two Irish girls full of yearnings and desires. Wicked! (Carlson 76)

However, the reaction in her own hamlet was the most explicit example of the mindless and powerful influence of the Church in rural Ireland. In an interview, O'Brien related an anecdote about her first book. "Two or three people had gone to Limerick and bought The Country Girls. The parish priest asked them to hand in the books, which they did, and he burnt them on the grounds of the church" (Guppy 257). She described the unmentionable -- sexuality -- and paved the way for future women writers to reveal their explicit experiences in writing.

But where were all the personal histories of Irish women before the twentieth century? Wasn't Edna O'Brien simply continuing a tradition of narrating the lives of these women? The answers to the above questions reflect the unique nature of Ireland and the patriarchal systems that controlled the country for centuries. In truth, as in so many other societies, there were few recognized narratives in women's

voices about women's lives. "Women's lot is hard anywhere, but an Irishwoman's lot is ten times harder" (Carlson 77). It was not until this century that Irish women writers emerged to illuminate the hidden lives of their peers. Catholic women raised in rural communities were neither the creators nor the subjects of their texts. This dilemma reflects the unusual political, social and cultural nature of Ireland. Supressed as a colony by Protestant England, the Catholic population, in general, was denied access to the voices of literature, the development of an Irish Catholic consciousness. Adding to the political oppression were the religious influences on Catholic women and their stories.

The voices of Irish women heard in the past two centuries tended to be Protestant and firmly established in the middle and upper classes. One of the most famous and successful of Irish women writers in the early nineteenth century was Maria Edgeworth (1768-1849), who chronicled the life of the privileged Anglo-Irish aristocracy in the "Big Houses," the estates of Protestants that dominated the Irish countryside. She was innovative in that most of her major characters were women rather than men. However, one of her most celebrated novels, Castle Rackrent, purportedly presents the memoirs of an Irish servant (male) in the employ of the Protestant gentry. Maria Edgeworth's attempts to portray the native Irishman were hampered by a lack of experience with the Catholic, Irish populace, but the book was recognized as a

highly original work of fiction.

Somerville and Ross (Edith Somerville - 1858-1949 and Violet Martin - 1862-1915) were also popular female writers during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They collaborated on several novels about the Anglo-Irish Ascendency and its social setting. Once again, upper-class women were writing about the upper classes. In one of their fictional works entitled Naboth's Vineyard (1891), the authors attempted to recreate Irish Catholic village life. Lacking understanding of the lower classes in Ireland, they could not accurately depict realistic characters. Violet Martin's early death ended the collaboration of Somerville and Ross and the voices of Irish women remained silent until the middle of the twentieth century.

The beginning of the century was dominated by the quest for a free Ireland. While women were active in public and political life, the literary world was still not accessible. Few emerged to portray the female perspective. However, the Catholic life in Ireland was finally documented in the powerful voice of James Joyce. At last, the silenced Catholic citizens had a creative interpreter. Joyce's revelations of the Catholic experience would resonate through the twentieth century and impact deeply on the emerging Catholic women authors, especially Edna O'Brien.

One of the most famous Irish women writers to emerge in this century was Elizabeth Bowen, an Anglo-Irish writer who

lived in England but recalled her Irish roots in many stories. In her most successful novel, The Heat of the Day, Bowen vividly incorporated into her narrative a vision of her Irish childhood at one of the Anglo-Irish "Big Houses," Bowen Court. Interestingly, her death in 1973 coincided with the flowering of Irish women's literature as several authors, among them Edna O'Brien, were recognized for their originality and depiction of the Irish experience.

Catholic writers? Not very many. The most prominent Catholic female writer before the 1960's was Kate O'Brien, who was no relation to Edna O'Brien except that the O'Brien surname denotes a descendent of Brian Boru, High King of Ireland in 1002 A.D. and victor at the battle of Clontarf in 1014. His tribal group was based in the Clare-Limerick area where Edna O'Brien was born. Kate O'Brien, too, was born in the Limerick area and was educated in convents and University College in London. Spain was her country of choice, but her characters reflected the author's Irish roots. Catholicism and its limitations play a significant role in Kate O'Brien's work even when her characters are living thousands of miles away from Ireland and in another culture. Perhaps her fiction foreshadowed Edna O'Brien's since both create narratives that deal with choices, self realization, "the human heart" (Kunitz 950) and the inability of their characters to escape psychically from their native land and patriarchal heritage. "She is almost the only articulate voice of a class and group

in Irish society which has been badly neglected by literature in the past" (Kunitz 950). However, Kate O'Brien did not concentrate on revealing the lives of those in rural Ireland but explored the society of cultured, middle-class Catholic men and women. "Her characters talk like people out of George Meredith or George Moore" (Kunitz 950). Naturally, it is not surprising that her dialogue would reflect two early twentieth century, male English writers since Kate O'Brien, too, suffered from a deprivation of women's fiction as paradigms. In spite of her similarity to accepted male writers, Kate O'Brien's fiction was not spared the wrath of her conservative, patriarchal homeland. Two of her novels -- Mary Lavelle (1936) and The Land of Spices (1941) -- were declared immoral by the Irish Censorship Board and banned in Ireland (Blain 806). This same Board was still powerful when Edna O'Brien's work was published and banned in the 1960s.

Finally, in the 1960s, the neglected stories of a whole segment of Irish society were revealed on the pages of women's literature in Ireland. The rich, the middle-class had spoken; now, it was time for the silent, the most marginalized, those who had lived outside the progressive and innovative cities, those who did not so much strive to succeed but simply fought to maintain their dignity in a structured and unyielding world. Authors such as Julia O'Faolain and Mary Lavin participated in the freeing of Irish women's voices. However, it fell to Edna O'Brien to liberate and give credence to Irish

Catholic women, to portray vividly and frankly the patriarchal pressures that imprisoned them and limited their ideas and potential for a fulfilling and happy life.

Why did the women of Ireland remain marginalized for so long? Irish male authors are renowned as some of the most creative and influential of the last two centuries. Oscar Wilde, once a student at Trinity College, Dublin, established his niche in the literary world, creating some of the most original plays of the nineteenth century, and his genius continues to be recognized. His characters are upper-class members of society. Another famous Irish writer, William Butler Yeats, created lyrical, imagistic poetry, reflecting the Irish love of country and landscape. Sean O'Casey's and J.M.Synge's dramas continue to be read, studied, and produced. These twentieth century authors mirrored a growing appreciation of the true nature of the Irish people who had for so long been captives in their own land, colonized by English society. The rise in Irish nationalism and a realization of the potential in the Irish people for greatness encouraged the flowering of creativity that was wholly unknown in previous centuries. The Irish nation began to emerge in the literature of its sons.

While some were praising the Irish spirit and culture, others showed the darker side of being Irish. The most noted and creative Irish male writer of this century is James Joyce, born a Catholic. He wrote about the Irish Catholic world of

Dublin and brought the structured and restraining world of confinement into the public domain of literature. The influence of James Joyce on writers, in general, and Irish writers, in particular, cannot be overstated. He recreated language, challenging the limits of the word to communicate and the narrative to convey the idea. Thoughtful revelations about growing up in Catholic Irish society -- the humor, the sadness, the idiosyncracies -- are vividly portrayed in Dubliners. The poignancy and frustration of being a Catholic male and a developing artist in a land of limits is the theme of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Certainly, Joyce redefined the nature of narrative and continues to be a touchstone for future writers. Samuel Beckett is another Irish son, considered one of the most brilliant and innovative novelists and dramatists of this century. However, his work echoes the troubling side of a childhood in Ireland. After a strict upbringing, characteristic of the times, and an education at Trinity College, Samuel Beckett exiled himself from Ireland and rarely returned. Exile from Ireland is a route that many writers have been forced to take, including Edna O'Brien and James Joyce. Beckett's vision, influenced no doubt by his past, portrays the fractured and absurdist view of human endeavor. Supremely sad and, at the same time, surprisingly humorous, his work remains an extraordinary tribute to the complex influences that a country and a life can have on a writer.

All of these writers have offered insight into the world of the Irish male. Women were minor characters in the literary works and when they appeared, their roles were usually confined to the traditional ones of mother and wife. James Joyce does introduce readers to Molly Bloom, a realistic, sensuous woman, in Ulysses, and O'Brien comments on Joyce's contribution to the authentic portrayal of Irish women in Some Irish Loving:

> Instead of a pilgrimage to Mary and Joseph, and Jude, Bridget or Ita, the women of Ireland ought to be down on their knees to Mister James Joyce who not only made their sexuality more patent to the world at large but who stripped from them the shackles of their own bound souls. (148-9)

For this creation of a lusty, Irish woman and other prohibited characterizations, language and events, his book was banned.

In a patriarchal world the men had to find their voices first before the women could hear theirs and so it was in Ireland. Freedom of discourse for women began to accelerate in the 1960s and continues today with more and more Irish women declaring their independence from the bonds of the past. Edna O'Brien was one of the pioneers in the battle to give Catholic women a voice. Through the specific she reveals the universal. Through the stories of the picturesque villages of rural Ireland, she speaks for all who have been denied their birthright by the stifling confines of patriarchal constructs.

Edna O'Brien is a prolific writer who has employed many literary genres as vehicles for her vision. Novels and short stories are her preferred forms, but she has also written

dramas for the stage and television. Her most successful drama to date is the lyrical and poignant depiction of the life of Virginia Woolf, simply titled Virginia. O'Brien researched Virginia Woolf's diaries and personal letters and combined Woolf's words with her own. The result is a spare but emotionally charged creation of the major events and relationships in Woolf's chaotic life.

Childhood has always held a fascination for O'Brien and, in truth, it is her storehouse of childhood memories that has provided her with the inspiration for so many of her narratives. Of her childhood inspiration O'Brien comments, "One knew everyone in our village and they knew us. I had sort of a limitless access to everyone's life story. For a writer it's a marvelous chance" (Smith,"Edna O'Brien's Magic" 30). In the same article, she confesses, "I'm obviously obsessed by my own and others' childhoods" (30). However, this love for the innocent interpretation of life at its earliest stages has also translated into another creative outlet for the author has written several children's books. Among them are A Christmas Treat, The Rescue, and Tales for the Telling: Irish Folk and Fairy Stories. Of this last book of folktales she says:

> Whether you write for children or whether you write for grown-ups, it's the same because what matters- what one is always groping for - is the magic. And fairytales are imbued with magic ("Edna O'Brien's Magic" 30).

Of her non-fiction work, Mother Ireland (1976) is the most relevant to and revealing of the themes in her work. In

this memoir she chronicles her childhood, her education at the convent school at Galway, and her first days in Dublin.

Interestingly, O'Brien has also written a memoir of James Joyce entitled James and Nora: A Portrait of Joyce's Marriage (1981). While attending the Pharmaceutical School in Dublin, she was introduced to the writings of James Joyce. In an interview in The Paris Review she recalls her confrontation with the fiction of Joyce. It was an epiphany for Edna O'Brien:

> The first book I ever bought - I've still got it- was called Introducing James Joyce by T.S. Eliot. It contained a short story, a piece from Portrait of the Artist . . . I read a scene from Portrait which is the Christmas dinner when everything begins pleasantly . . . the revelry before the flareup ensues between people who were for Parnell and those who were against him. Parnell had been dead a long time, but the Irish being Irish persist with history. Reading that book made me realize that I wanted literature for the rest of my life. (Guppy,"The Art of Fiction" 29)

In another interview she elaborated on the influence the Eliot book had on her own writing. After reading the selections, she realized, "that as a writer one must take one's material from life, from the simple, indisputable and often painful world about one, and give it somehow transfiguration..." (O'Brien 64). Certainly, this philosophy has been the cornerstone of her work.

O'Brien's major characters include not only women living in Ireland but also those in exile. In novels such as August is a Wicked Month (1965), Caualties of Peace (1966), and The High Road (1988), her women are battered by life, living in

exile and coping with daily existence. Some suffer tragedy as they attempt to find meaning and connection in the world after a doomed love affair. The locales are far from Ireland, taking place in London, on the French Riviera, and in a Spanish resort town. These adult women are divorced and alienated from their children, and live ineffectual lives. In Casualties of Peace, the main character is killed in a tragic example of mistaken identity just as she was beginning to trust in life again. The same fate awaited the most recent woman character created by O'Brien in her 1994 novel House of Splendid Isolation. This unfortunate, older female, desperate for some companionship and connection to another human being in an otherwise barren countryside village, attempts to befriend a young IRA terrorist who is hiding in her home. Although the relationship begins in a hostile manner as she is taken hostage, it soon becomes apparent that political partisanship aside, she enjoys his company. Tragically, she is caught in random gunfire that occurs in her own home. She dies suddenly, a victim of the crossfires of life.

Although Edna O'Brien has received critical acclaim for most of her fiction, her Irish stories are singled out for greatness. In her short stories and novels about Ireland and its forgotten women, she excels in narrative and descriptive power. Using first person point of view to reflect immediacy and intimacy in her characters, every story presents a distinctive viewpoint with a range and variety that is

strikingly original. Edna O'Brien may be writing about a type of wounded and disheartened woman, but each of her characters is masterfully created, possessing traits that separate her from the simple stereotypes of Irish womanhood. However, these individuals acting in their solitary spheres make up the collective womanhood that O'Brien creates. There are "types" certainly, but each "country girl" or "Irish mother" has something extraordinary and rare to convey through her own viewpoint. This individual perspective within the collective culture and society is O'Brien's forte and herein lies her utterly original contribution to the body of Irish literature. Her Irish stories searingly chronicle the conflicts between the powerless, individual female and the powerful religious and political forces for control of a woman's life and freedom.

Beginning with The Country Girls (1960), a story of two young girls from the rural countryside who take up residency in Dublin and encounter the urban life, O'Brien has taken the reader on a journey through the everyday lives of traditional, Irish woman, the patriarchal forces that shape their lives and those who try to discover their own paths to fulfillment. Ordinary events provide her characters with the backdrop of life. Her stories are told in the words of the women themselves, sometimes in a dreamy memory and occasionally as a stream of consciousness, reminiscent of Joyce and Beckett. As these women negotiate the path of life, O'Brien reminds the

reader of the wasted potential and unattained greatness that they endure as a result of societal and religious expectations and demands.

Because the Irish stories are her most powerful and vivid narratives, I will be concentrating particularly on these novels and short stories. The Country Girl Trilogy, A Scandalous Woman and Other Stories, Mrs. Reinhardt and Other Stories, A Fanatic Heart, The Love Object, A Pagan Place, Returning, and Lantern Slides will form the basis for this study of O'Brien and the vision of patriarchy in her fiction.

CHAPTER II - THE BACKGROUND OF THE IRISH CATHOLIC PATRIARCHY

"It is a pagan place and very circular" (O'Brien, A Pagan Place 15).

Why does Ireland seem to engender a fascination and mystique? Certainly, it is not the physical size of the country: Ireland is a small island nation, the last outpost in Europe before the abyss of the Atlantic Ocean, with a population of approximately three million people. It is not powerful, either economically or politically, and has been occupied by foreign invaders for most of its existence. True, its history is intrinsically linked to England, the hostile neighbor that dominated Irish life for almost one thousand years until the twentieth century. Ireland's proximity to such a powerful country would naturally generate interest in the symbiotic nature of the two kingdoms. However, location is not all. Other factors must be recognized in order to account for the attention given to it by the world community.

One of the reasons for the general interest in Ireland has to be the great number of Irish descendents living throughout the world, and particularly in the United States, who cherish their heritage and continue the folktales and mythology about their native country. Assimilation into other cultures has not prevented the "Irish" from preserving and popularizing their ancestry. In addition, American popular

culture, particularly the medium of film, has presented the "Irish" as a specialized culture with a number of idealized stereotypical characters -- the Irish priest, the self -- sacrificing Irish mother and the single, devoted female Irish servant among others. Negative images also appeared, especially the Irish drunk. In the twentieth century, this dissemination of information about a culture in the form of powerful screen images has become difficult to refute and demythologize. The fictionalized "Irish character" has co-opted the reality of a complex people whose ancestry defies generalizations. In fact, this is the problem that Edna O'Brien encountered when she attempted to write about the "real" Ireland.

Besides the people themselves, another aspect of Irish culture that has intrigued others is the mythology that permeates its traditional life. While many societies have tempered their rituals, folktales and myths of the past with more rational explanations for unexplained occurrences, the Irish continue their beliefs in the "other" world. The world of Irish mythology is enchanting, offering magical creatures (fairies, leprechauns, banshees, changelings), folk medicine in the form of charms or cures and superstitions that both amuse and fascinate. In rural Ireland (and most of Ireland is still pastoral), it is common to hear references to religious folklore and local superstition when commenting on the most mundane events. For example, if someone remarks on the beauty

of the mountains in the county of Kerry, the answer might be: "Yes, the Kerrymen were full of pride, so God gave them their land in clumps." In a casual conversation about the chances of rain, a native might reply: "They say if there is enough blue to make a sailor's britches, it will not rain." Certainly, the landscape of the country is a central factor in the development of Irish folklore. As the above examples demonstrate, the Irish were very aware of their natural surroundings and incorporated them into their superstitions. The very images that appeal to travelers today -- dark forests, brooding ruins, a sense of provincial isolation -- were foremost in the creation of Irish tales.

The integration of pagan and folk beliefs with Christianity is another unique feature of the Irish mythology and one that affects the development of the double patriarchy in Irish life. An example of this fusion of myth and religion can be seen in the following directive: "It is not safe to take a newborn child in your arms without making the sign of the cross over it" (Wilde 67). Simple maybe even quaint superstitions and yet very telling about the Irish culture. The early mystical stories, intertwining pagan and Christianized elements, have survived and embued the society with a distinctive national character. An essential element of Irish culture is this integration of history, fantasy, imagination, and religion.

> Tales were traditionally told at weddings, warmings of new houses, the eve of battle, bringing out of ale, feasts, taking over an inheritance, setting out on a voyage, seasonal festivites, wakes, funerals, and births. (Rees 210)

In short, storytelling was a major part of social events. Once Ireland was Christianized, the Celtic superstitions and stories were altered to reflect the new religion. Thus, "Stories of the coming of saints into the world have a great deal in common with those of 'secular' heroes" (Rees 224). The unique nature of Irish society, small enclaves of isolated people rather than organized urban units, helped solidify much of the social and cultural foundations of the Irish communities, including the dissemination of and consistent belief in the tales. "It was always the blood tie and not abstract codes that ruled Irish social life - and still does. The Irish Clan system - no foreigner could feel part of the Irish family tree" (Robertson 35). The attitude of distrust for outsiders reflects the repressive nature of Irish society and explains why the communities did not absorbed foreign influences into their culture or abandon their heritage.

This mythology formed the basis for the dual patriarchy which Edna O'Brien discloses in her fiction. According to Alwyn Rees in Celtic Heritage, "It was not considered proper for women to tell the stories of traditional heroes" (14). Other myths concerning women included the "seclusion motif ...arising out of a wellnigh universal belief that women at certain periods - puberty, menstruation and childbirth - do

not belong entirely to this world. They're both holy and unclean" (Rees 236). This attitude supports Gilbert and Gubar's statement that "Patriarchal mythology defines woman as created by, from and for men . . . e.g. Eve, Minerva, Sophia, and Galatia have incarnated men's ambivalence not only towards female sexuality but towards their own physicality" (Gilbert, Madwoman in the Attic 12). The tradition of patriarchy in myth at guaranteed the perpetuation of this ideology.

The subject of patriarchy has been thoroughly discussed in a number of books. Basically, patriarchy is an historical construct (Greene, Gayle XI) making possible the control of one gender by another. The word itself has various definitions, from purely legalistic to an all-encompassing and simplistic reference point for male domination. For this study, I am using the word patriarchy,

> in its wider definition, the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominence over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general. It implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power. (Lerner, The Creation of Patriarchy 239)

Economic, political and social developments over the centuries all contributed to the development and continuation of patriarchal standards throughout the western world. "Patriarchy was firmly established by the sixth century B.C." (Lerner, The Creation of the Feminine Consciousness 270) and continues today. In particular, the Irish patriarchy with its parallel development of religion and politics ensured the

continuation of a dual patriarchal system.

Ireland has a long history of colonization and enslavement; the inevitable influence of the conquerors created the Irish legacy. The mysterious Celts from northern Europe were the first to invade Ireland and impose their way of life on the Irish.

> Early Irish society was patriarchal. The legal and political life was governed by men. This was the case amongst the Indo-European societies from which most of the early European societies, including the Irish, inherited their social systems. (O'Corrain 1)

Much has been written about the historical Celts, and they continue to project a mythical quality that only increases with time. Nevertheless, their patriarchal beliefs infused Irish society and formed the foundations for future developments in all aspects of human interaction -- political, religious, and familial.

To state summarily, that women never had any rights or power would be to use the term patriarchy in its most simplistic and denigrated form, to perceive the male-female relationship as one of total bondage and slavery. Naturally, social systems are much more complex and evolve over centuries. At any given time, women might have had some powers, lost them and regained them in an endless cycle of change. For example, goddesses were worshiped in Ireland (Condron 26), and female creativity was appreciated. However, the cult of the warrior and hero began to subvert the goddess.

"Although women in Celtic society were controlled by man - fathers, brothers, husbands, sons - by the eighth century, women were able to exercise extensive rights within marriage" (O'Currain 9). Nevertheless, throughout Irish history, women did not gain equal power with men -- politically or economically -- nor did they have the freedom to develop their own intellect and creativity. Historically, "Women were kept from realizing their talents fully by the constraints patriarchy imposed on them" (Lerner, The Creation of the Feminist Consciousness 17).

The introduction of Christianity into Ireland has to be the country's most famous legend, the account of St. Patrick. Although there may have been Christian missionaries in Ireland before St. Patrick, his arrival in 432 A.D. marked the beginning of Catholicism. Briefly, historical evidence indicates that Patrick was brought to Ireland as a slave. He escaped, became a priest, and returned in order to convert the Celts to Christianity. Patrick traveled through Ireland, establishing churches and ordaining Irish priests. Because of his intense and persistent proselytizing, he succeeded in transforming the pagan island nation into a Catholic country.

Interspersed with historical records, however, are the legends and tales that surround this powerful saint. The most famous concerns St. Patrick and the snakes. It is said that he banished the serpents from Ireland. Although this story can be interpreted as a metaphor for the usurping of one religious

belief system by another, the narrative is presented as an actual occurrence. Another incident involves the world renowned symbol for Ireland, the shamrock. Tradition says:

> that Patrick, preaching a sermon on the Holy Trinity on the hill of Tara [a center of political power] became aware that the concept of the Holy Trinity was difficult for some of the congragation to apprehend and he made use of the shamrock as a visual aid. (Flanagan 39)

With St. Patrick came Christianity and the Christian tradition. Of course, patriarchy was reinforced in the societal structure of the Irish through the religious doctrine of the new religion. The merging of the double patriarchy began to take root. "Christianity has acted as the carrier of patriarchal consciousness for the past two thousand years" (Condron 184). The Christians introduced the Bible, with its intriguing stories about warriors, kings, prophets, and holy families. And inherent in these accounts were the seeds of patriarchal ideology. From the chronicle of Eve's culpability for the banishment from Paradise to the dominance of male exploits in the Biblical narratives, it was apparent that women were inferior to their male counterparts. "The Jewish covenant was with men - woman bears the man's 'seed'" (Lerner, The Creation of Patriarchy 180). Women were controlled by their fathers and, after marriage, by their husbands. "There is no question that the predominant family structure in the Biblical narrative is the Patriarchal family"(Lerner, The Creation of Patriarchy 168). Even in the New Testament, females were not apostles of Christ nor did they write any of

the Gospels. Mary, although the mother of Jesus, was powerless and subordinate. In later centuries, she would become both a positive and a negative role model for women, in particular, representing the silent, suffering, and self-sacrificing woman and mother. "Christian theology has long imposed upon women a norm of imitative self sacrifice based on the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth" (Hauseio, Foreword). The effect of the image of Blessed Mother on Irish women, and particularly mothers, will be discussed in a later chapter.

The integration of Christianity into the Celtic culture involved the absorption of the old into the new. "Since the Celtic stories were written down by the Christians, Celtic gods are hardly recognized" (Rees 14). An example of the merging of the two beliefs involves Brigit, originally a Celtic goddess who was transformed into St. Brigid, one of the famous saints of Ireland. Again, the mythology surrounding St. Brigid is parallel to St. Patrick. In fact, there is even a tradition that she is buried along with Patrick and St. Columba at Downpatrick in County Down. As evidence that Brigit and Brigid share a common ancestry, Laurence Flanagan in A Chronicle of Irish Saints writes,

> It seems most likely that her first convent was founded at Kildare . . . It may have been founded on the site of a pagan sanctuary, some of whose traditions were preserved, for example a perpetual fire, tended by nineteen nuns, was kept burning there until the Dissolution. (24)

St. Brigit is an example of a strong female figure absorbed by the Church and reconfigured to support Christian ideology.

Brigid, Mary, and many other female saints were praised for their self-sacrifice and devotion to God. Women saints, in particular, remained virgins, rejected marriage, became nuns and took care of the sick. "Female saints reinforced the ideals of purity and virginity" (Beal 88). The reward for imitating the exemplary lives of these holy women was the promise of eternal salvation, extremely enticing compensation.

There is ample evidence that women played a significant role in the early Church, founding and governing monasteries and abbeys, but their status continued to alter and diminish through the Middle Ages. The modifications in their power are not attributable to one cause but a series of events and philosophies that were dictated by economical, political, and religious forces. Women could not become priests, administer sacraments, or participate in the consecration during the Mass. Consequently, their salvation depended on men since men had the power to be intermediaries between God and humans. Economically, patriarchies trace their ancestry and inheritances through the father and the Celtic people established this pattern in Ireland. Therefore, women's virginity before marriage was important in order to clearly establish the children's parentage. This emphasis on chastity continued with the arrival of the Catholic Church and fused the religious with the secular.

Much has been written about the Church Fathers and how they reinforced the negative images of women. St. Paul has

been accused of misogyny because he wrote about women as a source of sin. Later, St. Thomas Aquinas asserted the inferiority of women. Finally:

> In the fifth century, St. Augustine of Hippo argued that woman was not created in God's image but only in his "likeness" which supports the idea of her "weakness" and greater propensity for sin. (Lerner, The Creation of Patriarchy 141).

But, once again, these generalizations about history can be simplistic and fail to acknowledge the complexity of the development of an ideological system. After all, "The period of the "establishment of patriarchy" [in the Old Testament] was not one 'event' but a process developing over a period of nearly 2500 years from 3100 to 600 B.C." (Lerner, The Creation of Patriarchy 8). Given the roots of the Catholic Church and its emphasis on male authority, it seems inevitable that women would not be granted equal power in the Church. "The Church's hierarchical structure is based upon a military model - The priests were the new heroes of society" (Condron 136).

In actuality, throughout the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church flourished differently in Ireland than in the rest of Europe. Isolated from the European continent, Ireland cultivated its own variant of Catholicism, at once very rigid and, at the same time, lax. For example, the Irish priests had "sisters," supposedly spiritual lovers with whom they lived, in spite of the dictate from Rome that celibacy was required.

In the twelfth century, several events occurred which altered the Irish Church. First, "The rape of the Abbess of

Kildare [a spiritual descendent of St. Brigid] symbolized the end of the era for women and religion in Ireland" (Condron 26). In other words, the limited power that women had within the confines of the convent was usurped. In addition, "St. Malachy of Armagh attempted to bring the organization and discipline of the Irish Church in line with the rest of Western Europe" (O'Currain 16). He succeeded in establishing dioceses to replace the powerful monasteries. This change would have repercussions in the following centuries. Closing the monasteries led to the development of local parishes with individual priests maintaining the power of Catholicism in rural communities. These dual incidents affected all Catholics. The former affected the loss of power for women in the Church while the latter undermined the freedom that the Irish clergy had enjoyed. Finally, "The Synod of Pisa in 1135 and the Second Lateran Council in 1139 ratified that clerical marriages were invalid since the vow of ordination took precedence over all other vows" (Condron, 146).

However, not one of these occurrences was as significant as the devastating political acts that would alter Ireland forever. It is one of the ironies of history that a country so loyal and devoted to the Catholic tradition should be betrayed by the papacy itself in the person of Pope Adrian IV. In the twelfth century, according to tradition, he encouraged King Henry II of England to invade Ireland. Perhaps this act was not so unthinkable considering that Adrian was the only

Englishman ever to be elected pope. The conspiring of the political and religious seen in the colonization of Ireland is later reflected in the country itself, the oppressed absorbing the codes of the oppressors. Therefore, Ireland was betrayed by the spiritual leader of the Catholic Church and, as a result, became even more rigidly Catholic -- a paradox of history.

Naturally, there are many reasons why the Church became powerful during the years and centuries of oppression and suppression. Although England and Ireland are neighbors geographically, from the onset of British rule, the cultural differences were extremely apparent. Ireland was always a rural nation consisting of small communities and counties with no effective centralized government. The English, on the other hand, were more organized politically. In addition, the English treated the Irish as an inferior race, denying them basic rights and marginalizing their existence. The parallels of England to Ireland and Ireland to women become ironically evident. The English dominated and oppressed the Irish just as the Irish dominated and oppressed their women.

England was a Catholic country when it annexed Ireland. However, in the sixteenth century, Henry VIII abolished the Catholic faith in England and the animosity between the two countries escalated. Hatred and oppression characterized Irish-English relations for the next century. As the English imposed more and more legislation to control and demoralize

the Irish, women's rights were adversely affected.

> Firstly, they were totally without formal political rights; secondly, their property and inheritance rights both within and outside of marriage were now governed by English common law, and thirdly, theirs was a subject and subsidiary role to the male and it was performed for the most part within a domestic context. (O'Tuathaigh 26)

When an entire country is enslaved, it is the powerless who suffer most. The rights that women had struggled for throughout the centuries were crushed in the sweeping suppression of the entire Irish populace.

Ireland was not unique in its centuries of hostile occupation. Unfortunately, all too many countries have suffered from foreign oppressors, who disenfranchized the natives in their homeland. What is singular about the Irish experience is inherent in its political, cultural, and religious life. Although the rural community owed its first allegiance to a local clan and county (twenty- six counties in Ireland), the fact that most of the Irish people were Catholic unified them against the British. The external British forces unintentionally contributed to the fusion of Irish nationalism with the Catholic hierarchy.

> After the Catholic defeat at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, the English concentrated on trying to extinguish Catholicism (no priests would be ordained, religious orders were banned, no land ownership, no rights of inheritance, no participation in civil service or the army); naturally, this only made the Irish more fervently Catholic. (Connery 121)

The Protestant domination of the government forced the Irish to seek affirmation in another sphere. The Catholic Church,

perceived as a protective force against the English overlords, filled the void and gradually became more powerful.

> The very success of the penal laws had an unforeseen result. The ablest and most active among the Roman Catholic gentry took service abroad, those who remained at home were excluded from public life, and so, in the absence of an intelligent professional middle class to take their place, political leadership passed to the clergy. The great political power of the Roman Catholic Church in modern Ireland can be traced directly to the effectiveness of the eighteenth century penal code. (Beckett 99)

Church and state began to weave together, overlapping beliefs that continue to the present day.

Ironically, Christian doctrine propelled the Irish to fight for external political freedom while imposing internal religious oppression on its own people. The private and personal moved into the realm of the public. The turmoil of the nineteenth century, building on two thousand years of Irish heritage, solidified the double patriarchal order. "There took place in the nineteenth century a close intertwining of Catholic and Irish identity" (Ford 25). Ostracized from the Protestant-dominated institutions, the Irish began to rely more and more on the Church for education, a role which the priests were more than willing to undertake. Therefore:

> Through the educational system, the church was able to preach its doctrine in detail perhaps for the first time in Irish history to the masses of the people . . . In addition, the spread of literacy permitted a rapid growth in the number of publications, religious as well as general, and provided yet another means of effective indoctrination. (Lee 39)

The dogma of the Catholic Church was thoroughly ingrained in the Irish citizens, a doctrine that was conservative and puritanical, particularly in its treatment of women. Women, taught by nuns who dispensed the official dictates of the Church, cooperated in their acceptance of marginalization. So the responses of Irish women reflected the experiences of women in general with patriarchy.

> The system of patriarchy can function only with the cooperation of women. This cooperation is secured by a variety of means: gender indoctrination; educational deprivation; the denial to the women of knowledge of their history; the dividing of women, one from another; by defining "respectability" and "deviance" according to women's sexual activities; by restraints and outright coercion; by discrimination in access to economic resources and political power; and by awarding class privileges to conforming women. (Lerner, The Creation of Patriarchy 217)

Certainly, most of the above elements were present in the Irish Catholic schools of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In Mother Ireland, Edna O'Brien chronicles many of these techniques that were a part of her Catholic school experience.

The devastating potato famine in Ireland during the nineteenth century also contributed to the unification of Church and state. The population of the country declined as more and more people emigrated to escape poverty and starvation. Throughout this tragic time, the Church provided leadership and solidified its role as moral and political guide. The famine also affected the role of women in the society. "The marriage rate fell as people left for other

countries and women tended to marry older men thus enhancing the authority of the husband" (Lee 38). By the turn of the century Catholicism was firmly established as the impetus behind Irish nationalism.

But why Catholicism? Most native Irish were Catholic at least in name before Ireland became a colony of England, and they embraced the religion with great fervor, obsessive in the practice of the faith. The religion itself is very seductive, offering a thoroughly organized scheme for eternal salvation, almost a "How to get into heaven" manual. The rules and regulations are defined precisely with very few exceptions. Lack of adherence to the faith results in sin and punishment. Sins are divided into two categories: venial and mortal. Venial sins, such as lying or disobeying parents, allow for human frailty. However, mortal sins -- murder, adultery, and others -- result in eternal damnation, a frightening prospect. The world of Catholicism is highly structured yet simple enough to understand. In addition, sin, guilt, a glorious Heaven, a fire and brimstone Hell -- these surreal qualities appealed to the Irish, who had within their national consciousness a tendency to believe in the supernatural coupled with a strong sense of retribution for breaking the codes. In addition, the language of the Church created a powerful imagery. I will discuss language more extensively in the following chapter, but briefly, the mystery of the Mass, the bravery and sacrifice of the martyrs, and Jesus himself

fueled the Irish sense of drama and mystery. So the Church promised salvation in return for following a set of laws that seemed deceptively simple. However, these tenets were easier in the ideal than in the real. Always an intense people, the Irish construed the doctrine of Catholicism in its strictest interpretation. "The special quality of Irish Catholicism is a holier-than-thou attitude and rigidly puritanical doctrine" (O'Connor 120). It is perfectly logical to see why this religious idealism spilled over into the political. Sacrifice to gain eternal salvation easily translates into sacrifice for one's country. The visions of religious martyrs suffering pain and death rather than deny Christ has parallels in giving up one's life for freedom. The melding of the two forces was inevitable.

After an intense and bloody conflict, the south of Ireland gained its freedom on December 6, 1921.

> The ideology adopted by the new state [Erie] was both Catholic and nationalistic. Ideology that glorified rural Irish life and romanticized the Catholic family. The problem for women was that this family was rigidly defined and patriarchal. (Beal 5)

With such general affirmation of women's subordinate role in the society, females did not have any access to political or religious power. In fact, they did not even have control over their own private lives since contraception was banned in "Section 17 of the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act of 1935" (MacCurtain 61).

> The 1937 Constitution was the culmination of this process of institutionalizing Catholic doctrine. It afforded a special position to the Catholic Church and reflected Catholic teaching in its articles on the family, education and private property. (Beal 9)

This is the community and country into which Edna O'Brien was born in the 1930s. She was indoctrinated like other women, absorbing the oppressive teachings of both Church and country, yet she managed to overcome the bonds of psychic imprisonment and have the courage to defy authority in creating a personal fiction detailing the reality of rural Ireland. One possible reason for her strength is that she is of her time and place. Her first novel was published in 1960, the beginning of a new decade of rebellion. In spite of its restrictive laws, Ireland could no longer restrain the cascade of ideas that were overflowing from England and America. In addition, the Second Vatican Council began the process of revolutionizing traditional Catholic rituals, hoping for a more "Christ-like" religion with less emphasis on sin. Ireland tried to continue its cultural isolation through the 1960s and 1970s but had to make concessions to the modern world. However, "Even though the hierarchy has since become more tolerant of social legislation, it is still widely accepted that the Church in Ireland is one of the most reactionary in the Catholic world" (Connery 166).

CHAPTER THREE - THE AUTHOR AND THE PATRIARCHY

> "'It's amazing,' said Miss O'Brien. Childhood really occupies at most twelve years of our early life . . . and the bulk of the rest of our lives is shadowed by that time." (Eckley 79)

In "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," Elaine Showalter wrote, "Woolf says in A Room of One's Own that 'a woman writing thinks back through her mother' but a woman writing thinks back through her father as well" (203). Such is the case with Edna O'Brien. She is both a product of patriarchy and an outsider observing the effects of that ideology. The dominant male culture controlled her education and her indoctrination into Irish culture and Catholicism. Women were taught to be submissive to males, in general, to fathers and husbands, in particular. Although they were permitted a rudimentary education in a convent school, this Catholic dominated background simply reinforced women's dependency on patriarchal values and elevated obedience to a moral imperative. Deviation from the acceptable norm was not simply a lapse in behavior but a blight on the soul, threatening the women's salvation in eternity. Men defined women's identities, and the females' images of themselves were distorted. O'Brien's women struggle with this conflict. Not knowing what is "right," they had both "the impulse to struggle and the urge to submit" (Miles 30). Those who

attempted another way of life were subjected to harsh recriminations. Heilbrun's observation is reflected in Irish patriarchy. "The social exclusion of rebellious women, their relegation to the margins of society . . . remind us how central to our lives are the patriarchal, hierarchial values and structures" (xix).

So it was for Edna O'Brien who understood the powerful implications of rebellion since she herself was castigated for revealing the suffocating world of Irish women. In an interview for Banned in Ireland: Censorship and the Irish Writer, she was asked: "Were you hurt in other ways when your books were banned - by your family or by the community in which you were reared?" She replied:

> Very much. 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 family, my mother and father, God rest them, were appalled. I got anonymous letters about sewers and sewerage and all that innuendo! (72)

As unconforming as she was, Edna O'Brien could not reject the need embedded in Irish women for acceptance in the social community and private family.

From the cultural influences espoused by neighbors, family and the state to the doctrines preached every Sunday from the pulpit, the Irish women was bombarded with images of the proper, pure, and loved. The punishments for any aberration from the acceptable were described in horrific detail. All but the strongest women absorbed these images and abdicated their individualism to the patriarchy. Even the strongest were

never free of the traps that closed on them in childhood.

This overwhelming indoctrination of females into patriarchal conceptions of women -- gender pre-determination or predestination -- is seen both in the fictional characters that O'Brien creates and in the author herself. As a product of the distorted ideology she depicts, O'Brien cannot help but incorporate the patriarchal influences into her fiction. Her experiences coincide with Gubar's pronouncement that, "Women defined by men have a difficult time when they want to become creators of text" (244). Even as O'Brien's work condemns the manipulation and negative power on Irish women, the images and language she must rely on reflect her heritage in the Irish double patriarchy, Church and state. Again, Gubar's reflections mirror O'Brien's ordeals. "For the female artist the essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those patriarchal definitions that intervene between herself and 'herself'" (17). The dilemma appears in the following paradox. To ignore her background and attempt to purge her works of patriarchal indoctrination would mean that the author must deny integral sources of her creativity -- her childhood remembrances, her intimate involvement wit rural village life in Ireland -- in short, her visceral connection with her subjects. On the other hand, to incorporate the very images and language that corrupted her characters seems only to reinforce the very institutions that she wants to expose and criticize. So O'Brien faced the problem of all female authors

who seek an objective language of their own. "When women speak, they cannot help but enter male-dominated discourse" (Munich 239).

O'Brien acknowledges that she cannot escape her past, particularly her Catholicism. She told an interviewer, "The words of the gospels - the Word so to speak and the words - always had, and still do have, enormous attraction for me and impose exigence in the getting them right" (McQuade 48). However, O'Brien attempts to subvert the undeniable power of Catholic ideology and imagery by co-opting them for her own vision. The images and doctrine appear frequently in startling metaphors and narrative techniques which surprise the reader and bring O'Brien's perceptions into sharp contrast with the traditional meaning of the iconography. Even as her characters verbalize bits of prayers and religious platitudes incorporated in casual conversation, they have no consciousness of the inappropriate juxtaposition of language and deeds. However, the reader perceives O'Brien's irony in using the "sacred" language and images of the Church to reveal the ravages of the established patriarchal codes.

In "A Scandalous Woman," one of O'Brien's short stories, two teenage girls constantly use the language of religious references even as one engages in pre-marital sex while the other lies to her mother about her "sinful" friend.

> We used to pray on the way home, say prayers and ejaculations, and very often when we leant against the grass bank while Eily donned her old skirt and her old canvas shoes, we said one or other of the

> mysteries of the rosary. (O'Brien, A Scandalous Woman and Other Stories 17)

The tension between word and deed heightens as young girls use the only language they know to create the poignancy that O'Brien wants to reveal.

> One day all these sins would have to be reckoned with. I used to shudder at night when I went over the number of commandments we were breaking, but I grieved more on her [Eily's] behalf, because she was breaking the worst one of all in those embraces and transactions with him. (17)

The irony is that in spite of their fears of Hell and eternal retribution, the girls continue their conspiracy, filled with guilt for what could be the normal and healthy activities of maturing females.

However, the lure of religious representations is strong, as O'Brien describes in a lyrical litany:

> We spent the time wandering through the stalls, looking at the tiers of rosary beads that were as dazzling as necklaces, all hanging side by side and quivering in the breeze, all colors, and of different stones, then of course the bright scapulars, and all kinds of little medals and beautiful crucifixes that were bigger than the girth of one's hand and even some that had a small cavity within, where a relic was contained, and also beautiful prayer books and missals, some with gold edging and little holdalls made of filigree. (28)

The religious articles present a paradox. Although they most certainly have religious symbolism, they are also physically seductive as the girls have a visceral and sensuous reaction to these items. For simple, rural, impoverished country girls, the religion provides a mystical and material method of adornment, blurring the secular and religious. The

girls dress themselves with religious "jewelry," carry "filigree" books and want to possess rosaries of "different stones." The descriptive language, alluring and enchanting in itself, conveys and reinforces the power of images. However, O'Brien subverts these seemingly innocent icons by having them act as a contrast for the realistic and savage story of the destruction of Eily by the ruling patriarchal system. While the girls are being lured into passivity and obedience through the possessions of religious artifacts, plans are made to force Eily into a loveless marriage with her "seducer."

In spite of the lovely and magical veneer of religion, the doctrine demands retribution and punishment for anyone who defies the commandments. Eily's parents are merciless in their service of the prevailing patriarchal justice as they abuse and condemn their daughter. The reality becomes more ironic as the scene changes from the glorification of religious articles and activities to the description of sadistic and cruel methods employed by the family to elicit a "confession" from Eily about her sinful associations. "One minute they were asking her kindly, another minute they were heckling, another minute her father swore that it was to the lunatic asylum that she would be sent" (29). The narrator, commenting poignantly on Eily's torturous interrogation, interjected, "I know for a fact that her meals - a hunk of bread and a mug of weak tea - were handed into her twice a day, and that she had nothing else to do only cry, and think . . . and probably have to keep

making noises to frighten off the mice" (29).

Eily is forced to marry and live out the rest of her life as an Irish matron. There is no "deus ex machina" in O'Brien's fiction (no one comes to the rescue); Eily does not escape but remains a mother and wife. The narrator does see her once, a crazed madwoman roaming the streets. Years later, the narrator visits her former friend and comments on the power of the patriarchy to ruin women's lives. Veiled within the traditional emblems and language, O'Brien's potent reimaging creates a depth of poignancy through understated dialogue and observations. At their meeting, the narrator is stunned by the apparent complacency in Eily. "My first thought was that they must have drugged the feeling out of her, they must have given her strange brews and along with quelling her madness they had taken the spark away" (43). Eily had succumbed to the overwhelming powers that succeeded in controlling her. The addition of a religious ritual only seems to reinforce the destruction of Eily's passion -- a baptism of submission. "She kissed me and put a little holy water on my forehead, delving it in deeply, as if I was dough" (43). The narrator's final observation is scathing in its indictment of a culture that would destroy its liveliest youth. "I thought that ours indeed was a land of shame, a land of murder, and a land of strange sacrificial women" (43).

The fiction of Edna O'Brien resonates with these memories of cultural indoctrination during childhood. Exactly what were

the forces that could account for so many women internalizing and responding to the dominant patriarchy? Geography was an important component, of course. Ireland was essentially isolated and comprised of small, rural, self-contained villages that created and maintained their traditions with very little interference from the outside world. In "A Scandalous Woman" the entire town is drawn into Eily's plight, including the narrator's mother, who helped to serve the food on the evening the "seducer" was interrogated, and the local priest. In fact, when the "seducer" attempted to leave the town rather than marry Eily, "Three strong men impeded him and brought him up the mountain for a drive in their lorry. For a week after he was indisposed, and it is said that his black eyes were as big as bubble gum" (35). Such blatant examples of swift retribution were significant in insuring compliance with traditions. However, women cooperated in their servitude and even exulted in it. Therefore, significant forces must have been present in order to perpetuate this duality. According to Kowaleski-Wallace in Their Fathers' Daughters, "The perpetuation of patriarchal structures depends on the participation of both masculine and feminine parties. It is not simply that women were 'duped' into daughterly submission" (12). That power to instill submission was held to the largest extent by the Catholic Church.

In a New York Times Magazine article, "Because of the Stories," Father Andrew M. Greeley discussed the potency of

symbolism in the Catholic Church. "The religious images of Catholicism are acquired early in life and are tenacious. You may break with the institution, you may reject the propositions, but you cannot escape the images" (40). Edna O'Brien would certainly agree with this assessment. The images begin with Jesus, first as a helpless babe in the Christmas story and then as a crucified Christ, scourged and tortured, with the subliminal echoes of sacrifice reverberating through the crucifixion. Mary, the perfect selfless mother, loving and generous, was a role model for the Irish woman. The fact that she did not engage in sexual activities even when conceiving a child only enhanced the emphasis on virginity which seemed to be such a blessed state, a subtle subtext for avoiding sexuality. Fantastic creatures such as angels were ever invisibly present, guiding and cajoling Catholics to choose goodness and protecting them from demons who wanted to collect more damned souls for Hell. The phantasmagoric images of Hell and Satan, evil personified, along with sin, creating black marks on the immortal soul, and guilt created a fear that assured obedience to the tenets of the religion. The words themselves reinforced imagery that fired the imagination -- Heaven, salvation, purgatory, punishment, damnation and Hell. For the Irish, who were a superstitious people, the Christian iconography reconfirmed their beliefs in a supernatural world and retribution for defiance of the rules. An unconscious absorption of these images and their metaphorical meanings

cannot be denied. And so the tenets of religion became referential, that is, the believer (and in this case Edna O'Brien's characters) blurt out Catholic similes, language, and situations as a way of adding the power of religion and God to their statements.

The stories of the saints, those humans who through sacrifice and extraordinarily holy lives were admitted to the hierarchy of heaven, were exceedingly influential. For women, the vision of beautiful young female saints, often depicted on holy cards wearing long, flowing gowns and carrying Christian symbols such as crucifixes and flowers, was powerful. In particular, those saints who accepted torture and death rather than submit to sex were portrayed as role models for young girls.

Of course, the tales were told without mentioning the word sex. For instance, St. Agnes wanted to devote her life to God instead of a man in marriage. She chose martyrdom rather than lose her virginity. Even if a female saint did not choose death, she often rejected men and marriage (sex) for God. Typical of these saints were some Celtic saints, St.Ita of Killeedy, and the patroness of Ireland, St. Brigid of Kildare. St. Ita's story contains the typical situation of so many other sainted nuns.

> When her Christian father sought to arrange her marriage to a noble youth, she fasted in protest. Her prayers were answered when an angel appeared to her father persuading him that she must be allowed to pursue her holy vocation. (Wallace 17)

Many more mythological tales surround the famous St. Brigid of Kildare but most of them are similar to St. Ita's, that is, she rejects her father's choice of a husband and becomes a nun, founding a convent and spreading Christianity throughout Ireland. In addition to offering young girls role models for purity, these stories no doubt influenced them to consider becoming nuns. The irony about these sainted nuns is that their obedience to God was emphasized while their independence as single women founding and guiding religious orders (exerting some power within the religion) was overlooked. Rather they were seen as "married to God" and totally at his mercy. The subtext of the legends was understood on a subconscious level.

On a purely social level, the Church provided opportunities for a respite from the grinding boredom of isolating farm work. The interrelationship of social life and the Church was one of the reasons why two patriarchal ideologies developed in Ireland, each giving power to the other. The holidays of Christmas and Easter, the satisfaction of a Lenten sacrifice and even the weekly attendance at Mass gave ritual and order to an otherwise uneventful year. Those rituals created startling and unforgettable images -- mysterious and unapproachable nuns chanting Latin verses in a darkened, candle-lit church; young girls in pure white communion dresses receiving the "Body of Christ" for the first time; babies being baptized; the old being buried. Edna

O'Brien emphasized these lasting impressions in a passage from her memoir, Mother Ireland. Discussing her village, she writes:

> On the last day of Lent suffering reached its climax - there were holy hours, kissing of the Cross, further fasts, vigils in the chapel with the statues and tabernacles draped in purple, all gaiety extinguished, the very flowers and flower vases taken away and continuous rounds of Stations in which gaudy representations drew attention to His fall, His scourge, the small tenderness afforded Him by Veronica who offered Him a hand towel, the lamentation of His mother and His being nailed to the Cross upon which he died. (32)

The language is awe-inspiring even in this factual account, let alone when it would be embellished by a dedicated and highly creative priest or nun.

Most of O'Brien's works contain the religious metaphors and language that are her patriarchal legacy, but in two of her novels the fracturing and distortion of the original shocks the reader into a new assessment of these prevalent images. The two novels are Johnny I Hardly Knew You and Night. I have chosen these brief but intense works because they offer examples of another aspect of O'Brien's patriarchal roots, her confessional prose.

Young women growing up in a rural Irish village were not encouraged to voice their opinions or challenge authority. Family and religion combined to keep the children silent and obedient. "Irish people do not like to be contradicted" (O'Brien, Mother Ireland 20). In the convent schools that virtually all Catholic girls attended, the nuns dominated and

the students conformed. Most aberrant behavior, no matter how minor, was met with appropriate or inappropriate punishment, depending on the charity of the nuns. The point is that silence was cherished and advocated while expressing opinion was discouraged if not completely prohibited. So where or how would a female be able to speak freely, to question, to reveal her thoughts without fear of retribution? For women of Edna O'Brien's generation, the answer was the confessional -- again, a manifestation of the Catholic faith. Whispering among friends about "sinful" subjects such as sex and men was one method of sharing ideas but there was always the possibility that the secrets would be revealed. For example, in "A Scandalous Woman," the mother interrogated her daughter about the clandestine assignations between Eily and her "seducer." The narrator confides:

> I found it hard to pray because I was always thinking of the flogging I would get for being implicated. She cross-examined me. Did I know anything about it? Had Eily ever met him? Why had she made herself so much style, especially that slit skirt. (O'Brien, A Scandalous Woman and Other Stories 26)

Although the narrator does not inform on Eily, there was the ever present threat of betrayal from one's peers. Therefore, the confessional became the only place where thoughts and sins could be disclosed anonymously. In spite of the seemingly oppressive atmosphere of the confessional (whispering into a darkened opening that separated two individuals), the priest listened in silence while the penitent confessed. The intimacy

of this encounter produced many emotions ranging from fear to relief and hope. No matter how venial or mortal the sin, if the sinner felt contrition, the priest was obliged to listen and grant absolution (along with a penance, of course). Even if the priest was aware of the identity of the confessor, he was forbidden to reveal the nature of the confessional conversation. The promise of forgiveness and renewal was a vital consolation for those who felt isolated and sinful.

The confessional tone apparent in many of O'Brien's works reflects the elements of the Catholic penitential ritual. Her narrators speak in the first person with a soft, quiet tone. In many cases, they whisper their secret desires and sins, hoping for communication, understanding, and, yes, absolution. These characters, all women, seek forgiveness from the reader for their perceived transgressions. An undertone of guilt is apparent as these women lay bare their shrouded thoughts. This intimacy between reader and characters is moving, forcing the reader to act as a secular priest in the confessional process; that is, to listen, react, perhaps judge, and even forgive. O'Brien allows her women to speak within the patriarchal form but secularizes and liberates the confessions from their religious underpinning. The women speak openly without the specter of rigid doctrine to form judgments. Forgiveness from a perhaps more understanding secular listener is more readily available to them. The reader listens as a priest but does not have to judge as a priest. O'Brien's women are at long last

heard in a non-judgmental court and, while not always absolved, at least understood.

In Johnny I Hardly Knew You, O'Brien's debt to the patriarchy is apparent, as she uses her genius to re-invent the ideological constraints and shape her vision of the Irish woman. The novel concerns a love affair that ends tragically with the murder of a young lover. The narrative is not chronological but moves from episode to episode like rambling memory, trying to reconstruct a rational for the events that transpired. Very often the narrator returns to the present imagining the procedures of the next day when she will be brought to court to face her crime.

A confessional tone is evident from the opening lines and creates a dual symbolic effect. The narrator will confess to a murder in open court the following day. However, throughout the text the reader hears her private confession, the truth that will not appear in the court records. In this way, the drama of reality, as opposed to the perception of reality, bonds the reader to the murderer. The symbolic secular priest must listen: "Tomorrow I shall have to tell them. I shall have to stand in that court and tell them why I did it" (7). Of course, it is a foregone conclusion that she will never confess the real reason for killing one so young. Only the reader is allowed to hear the private confession.

At first, the "tell them why I did it" seems deceptively simple but, of course, the complexity of such a vicious act

becomes more apparent as the novel unfolds. The reader is introduced to a wounded woman, one who has had problems with her family and male/female relationships throughout her life. Her confession is typical of an O'Brien heroine. "But we have so many voices in us, how do we know which ones to obey?" (83). Confusion is natural as she tries to rationalize her shocking revelations.

> Certainly I should have killed long ago. It was mere blunder and restraint that stopped me. Killed the mad father with the long gaitered shins, or the mad mother whose insides I visualized as a bowl of surping and usurping blood. (13)

In her confessional, she blurts out the most prohibited thoughts, including her incestuous feelings for her son. "Oh to be loved by him. Incest raising its little tonsured head. It must be the nearest thing to birth, to couple with one's own, to reunite" (17). She says it with such sincerity that the reader almost believes that incest might be acceptable on some level. She again reveals intimate thoughts about other couples, realistic and candid considering that curiosity about others' sex lives, while not unusual, is not often expressed.

> How ravingly, and how covetously have I not thought of marriage beds. The marriage beds of others, the covers, the series of covers, under which they lurk, the secrets and confidences that are imparted, bonds made, bonds broken, the ordinariness and, yes, the extraordinariness of it all. (44)

Her marriage was a failure. Tied to a violent man (a common situation for O'Brien's women), she finally makes her escape but not without the scars of destroyed affection.

Later, the reader learns that she had an unsatisfactory affair with a married man ironically named Jude (patron saint of desparate causes). Naturally, this relationship proves unsatisfactory, but as with so many despairing heroines, she does not have the courage to end this hopeless relationship. Instead, it becomes one more cause for her final violent act.

The person she murders is a young man named Hart, a friend and contemporary of her son. The themes of destructive relationships among mothers, sons, and young men in this novel could precipitate a discussion of the intimate nature of such relationships but is not the emphasis in this analysis. Instead, it is the confessional thought-patterns of the narrator as she plunges from idea to idea and incident to incident that gives this novel such tension. For example, the conflict between accepting punishment and seeking escape is very intense. As the traditional Irish woman, the narrator seemingly is ready to acquiesce passively to retribution. Yet, self-preservation is foremost and she rebels against the simplistic cause and effect of action equaling punishment. Rather she rationalizes, searching for the unanswerable.

> At times I am fair and I do admit that I must pay for this death. At other times I rage and hit the wall and say I have been paying for crimes all my life, ones that I did not commit, the sins of my father, etcetera. Then again to say that to kill him - loving him as I did - constitutes the truest and most perfect sacrifices. (31)

This last statement is filled with irony, an example of O'Brien's understated revelation of the emptiness of

patriarchal beliefs. The warped image of murdering a lover as a form of personal sacrifice is an aberration of the whole idea of love and sacrifice.

Nora (the reader eventually learns her name) recounts her insecurity and her growing desire for Hart, all the while worrying about their May-December relationship. Fearing the worst, she informs her son about the intrigue. When her son gives his approval, Nora is optimistic about the future. Of course, part of the poignancy of this confessional tone is the fact that the reader cannot harbor any hope for this couple. They were doomed from the first line of the novel. Although the murder is completed before the novel begins, why Nora kills Hart is not revealed until the last pages. This narrative technique is compelling and involves the reader on multiple levels.

Freed to hear her rambling confession, the reader cannot assess the horror or judge Nora because all the details are not available. Learning that Nora suffocated Hart because he had a seizure, because this handsome and vital man was "stripped of his beauty" (138), utterly shocks and is a cause for rethinking all the episodes that Nora has confessed. The results of her sorrowful life are more appalling than can be anticipated. So this is the dreadful conclusion to a life lived in silent agony. The tension, sadness, and acceptance are experienced on a vicarious level when Nora recounts the simple pleasures that were the sources of joy. "Dawn, day,

dark, frost, cloud, sprinkling, icicle, a fall of snow, bare places covered over, sparrow and red wings, daisy, hollyhocks, wall marigolds - ah ye world that I hold dear, soon now you will be slipping away" (143). Yet there is a resignation and even a sense of peace in Nora's last words. The reader has listened to her confession and she feels exonerated - - not necessarily forgiven in the traditional Catholic sense of absolution but in the understanding of those who at least listen to her pain.

Within the confessional spirit of Johnny I Hardly Knew You, O'Brien incorporates religious imagery and language to emphasize Nora's plight. However, she juxtaposes the images with incongruous events. In other words, she evokes the vision of religion where religious symbolism is inappropriate. The result is startling, O'Brien co-opting patriarchal icons to emphasize the opposite.

After graphically describing an episode of oral sex, the narrator states, "Oh Lamb of God who watches over the lilies of the field, why did you not stop me when I was doing it - not the little harmless venial, sinning suckle but the crime that has led me here" (10). The plea tumbles from Nora's lips, the cliches ingrained in childhood without a conscious thought of the ludicrous situation. The echoes of a God who watches over all is also present in the above "prayer." And the ripples of God's fault for not protecting her harken back to the simple lessons of childhood -- shattered by the realities

of later life.

Speaking about wives whose husbands are unfaithful, Nora says, "I know that story, that unpretty story, those waiting wives, those creatures to whom guardian angels give the first inkling of infidelity" (11). What an interesting concept! Guardian angels, those creatures that protect Catholics from harm actually speaking about a mortal sin -- adultery: it is almost impossible to conceive of these angelic, winged creatures knowing anything about such sins as adultery. After all, angels have been envisioned, traditionally, as androgynous, sexless beings, not quite the image of whispering beings who divulge sexual gossip to those they are supposed to protect. In keeping with the theme of adultery, Nora prays to God that her love affair with Jude (her married lover) will continue. "I was upstairs when he came in, on my knees praying, if you please, praying that all would be well" (19).

When she finally describes Hart, the irony of recognition is obvious. "His beauty will be remarked upon, condoned, his long Christ-like face, his soft shoulder length hair and his mouth like the lips of a beautiful purse that opened wide in order to be deployed of its contents" (52). Christ-like, and like Christ he will be sacrificed - for love? Who was Nora really killing? Perhaps she was destroying all the images that infiltrated her psyche long ago. Recounting the sexual moments with Hart, Nora employs Christian wording to imbue her descriptions with a religious dimension. "It was not like

love-making, it was almost passionless, almost with a breath of sanctity" (119). Trying to verbalize her joy with him, Nora murmurs:

> There is the joyful, the sorrowful and the glorious, I said, recalling the mysteries of the rosary and perhaps because of this childish moment between us I felt a longing to be restored to the order and litany of my youth. (125)
> . . . nothing would deter me, not doom, not death, not anointed ones, not caution, not conscience, not the tales of the suffering Christ. (135)

Finally, the details of Hart's epileptic seizure are vividly chronicled in the most vile images, almost embracing the language of the Apocalypse.

> Terrible obscene spasms as if his very desires had originated in the underworld . . . I could never befriend that face again, that might at any moment convert itself into this other thing, this muck sweat demon. Gone the St. John of the Cross and instead the very features of a Lucifer but without intellect and without control. (138)

Throughout this manifestation of evil Nora still relies on the childhood myths of a God who will grant any wish sought in prayer, even senseless murder. Nora humbly states, "I asked God to let me free and I promised to atone till the day I died, in perpetual mourning if necessary" (142). The naivete of this plea underscores the depth of religious intrusion into secular matters. The reader senses that Nora sees herself as one of the silent women doing her penance for the mortal sin -- another image from the Catholic Church -- only this time she would try to repent for a selfish act of human destruction. The incorporation of the religious into the secular heightens the drama, revealing at once the lack of authority in the

religous iconography and the moral bankruptcy of the language itself. O'Brien's heroine had been totally immersed in the partriarchy -- knows no other words, can use no other words. Yet O'Brien subverts the words themselves to show the emptiness of images and beliefs.

However, all is not tragic in Edna O'Brien's fiction. Even in the midst of despair and murder, she manages to insert some humorous situations. These off-hand comments at first jar the reader, who has been immersed in the multiple problems of the protagonist. Suddenly, Nora makes an observation that is quite funny. This sudden and subtle change of tone again emphasizes the simple beliefs, actually superstitions, which intertwine with the orthodox Christian doctrine. The statements themselves punctuate the believer's misunderstanding of the religion itself. So, Nora, in a serious tone, relates an anecdote about her mother which is humorous, absurd, and ultimately sad.

> I thought at once of my mother and of her ingrained irrational fear of black magic. In fact her vision of reaching heaven is severely marred by the fear that all those savages whom missionaries have converted will be strolling around walking in the gardens, sitting in the deck chairs, using cups and goblets, availing of baths and lavatories if there are such amenities there. (53)

The utter innocence of these remarks invite a pause in the text. The simplistic expression of religious tenets with racist undertones cannot be denied. Are bathrooms available in heaven? Will the prejudices of this world continue in the eternal house of God?

Christianity preaches brotherhood and love, yet Nora's mother does not want to share her heaven with "savages." Her reactions provide a perfect example of the gulf between actual Catholic theology and popular perceptions and manifestations of that theology. Even the most mundane chores could be embued with religious content. "The way I see it now, I think we were cleaning our souls when we did such a thorough job of our abode, cleaning our souls of all our sins, mortal and venial" (55). The physical act of cleaning transformed into a supernatural and mystical experience is characteristic of O'Brien's lyrical vocabulary. However, the irony of the everyday described in terms of the eternal is the fact that there is no escape from the religion; it infiltrates every corner of life.

Occasionally, the religious iconography takes on sexual overtones. The relationship seems inevitable. After all, religious belief can be passionate on a spiritual level. That heightening of emotions can very easily be manifested in a physical reaction -- an orgasm of spiritual pleasure. In speaking about the three times in her life that she never wanted to end, Nora said:

> The second was when Hart made a proposal to me, and the third was on the day of my first Holy communion when the host seemed to fill the inside of my body with all the ecstasy I had ever craved, and the white satin dress and fine veil were a gauze between me and the world. (108)

Here we see sexual feelings during a solemn and pure occasion; such was often the reaction of the young to the romantic

rituals of Catholicism. This sexual reaction to religious traditions and representatives was more common than anyone would guess. In Mother Ireland, O'Brien relates the sexual tension that her mother and she felt when a young priest, who was soon to leave for the foreign missions (a romantic concept in itself), unexpectedly visited. Both women experienced heightened emotions as the mother prepared tea and cakes. "We knelt on the stone, side by side, closed our eyes and awaited his blessed hands. Once he was gone my mother was overactive . . . " (54). The mother attempted to overcome her emotional tension by immersing herself in chores. However, O'Brien recognized the power of their reactions when she comments about her mother, "She too had felt some odd pang" (54). In Johnny I Hardly Knew You O'Brien manipulates the patriarchal traditions that shaped so much of her life and reinvents them in order to expose the cruelty and injustice inherent in this system.

The novel Night provides another example of O'Brien's incorporation of the past to expose the present. In this work, the "sinner" has moved from the confessional to the bedroom -- a much more intimate location. The author mimics the conclusion of James Joyce's Ulysses in which Molly Bloom finally gives voice to the Irish woman, a lusty voice revealing forbidden secrets and desires. Joyce's Molly becomes O'Brien's Mary, but there is a difference. While Molly glories in her earthy, sexual freedom, Mary still feels the psychic

wounds of patriarchal domination. The novel actually becomes a spiritual journey as Mary remembers the past and attempts to overcome its negative effects. Although the author employs a random episodic narrative, her main character is more organized in her thoughts than Molly Bloom. In spite of an occasional thread of interior monologue, O'Brien continues the pattern no doubt learned in convent school -- sentences, paragraphs and transitions. While Joyce attempted to tear the fabric of language by "breaking the rules," O'Brien maintains the tradition of grammar, relying on the power of fractured images and language for innovation and truth.

The symbols of loss and dislocation are evident from the beginning of Night as Mary, sprawled out on a fourposter bed begins her confession with a paradox more typical of Samuel Beckett than Edna O'Brien: "One fine day in the middle of the night" (7) alerts us to Mary's "topsy turvy" (7) world. Mary is not even in her own bed, or house, or even apartment. She is housesitting, displaced with no possessions, physically and psychically naked. Mary attempts to sort out her life, to separate from her past, to be renewed.

> I want to be by myself at last and to be robbed of the stupid, supporting malady they call hope. Not to be a member of the communion of saints or gods or demi-gods or fathers or mothers or grandfathers or grandmothers or brothers or sisters or brethren of any kind . . . (11)

the litany of relationships that have warped her as a woman. However, these relationships are easily eluded. The religious, patriarchal underpinnings of a life continue as a presence

even in unconscious offhand statements. Mary remembers, "Christmas is not long gone. It went by without too much event. I did not partake of the sacraments" (15). The subtext of that simple statement is obvious. For all her bravura, Mary is still aware of sin and punishment. Missing Mass on Christmas day is a punishable offense, and she cannot forget that she committed this sin. As she bitterly describes significant incidents that shaped her life -- her mother's illness and death, her broken marriage, her separation from her son, her varied sexual encounters -- the cruelties of life in rural Ireland are revealed. For example, the contradictions of what was preached and what actually occurred confused the young and impressionable children. "Another hobo, nicknamed The Birdie, a crooner, sang 'The Bells of St. Mary' while slipping his hand in under women's clothing when they happened to be at devotions" (35). The scene presents dark humor and despair at the same time.

Sex and religion seem incompatible, but O'Brien manages to integrate the two in a creative merging. When describing her first sexual encounter, Mary must tell the reader, "It began harmlessly enough - the holy sacrament of Mass, a snappy sermon and in the inclement afternoon, a fancy dress parade" (36). Only O'Brien's characters would include the fact that they attended Mass before losing their virginity. Seduction and betrayal soured Mary on human (read intimate) contact. But her memory survives.

Religious ritual is never very far from the consciousness of an Irish girl. Mary does not want to leave the lovely house, and wishes the owners would not return. As a child she had been taught to depend on God and the saints when she wanted something. Now powerless to prevent the inevitable, Mary returns to her roots. "They don't have to die, just so long as they never come back. I know it's futile but I still ask for it . . . I am making a novena for that intention" (50). No longer a practicing Catholic, no longer a believer, Mary still resorts to the echoes of her youth to solve her problems. This contradiction strengthens O'Brien's vision of the Irish woman caught between two worlds. But what worlds? Mary fits in nowhere.

When recalling a love affair with "Duke," she remembers the evening they attended a party of his friends, all rich socialites. Mary felt alienated from this level of society: "A Bentley is not my habitat, somehow I look better in a cart, drawing it by the thills" (91). However, Mary no longer belongs in that cart either.

Seeking solace, she confesses how she tried to reconnect with her past but each attempt ended in failure.

> Still little by little the circle dwindles. One has to admit that things are thinning out, handshakes getting more limp, birthdays getting forgotten or ignored, people dying or emigrating to Australia, people going bonkers or taking umbrage for the remainder of their lives. (108)

A visit to an old friend proved unrewarding as both realized that their relationship was a part of the dead past.

> And she linked me, but she did not press upon my arm and we did not say any little recouping thing... That farewell for whatever reason carried with it the nugget of all the others and the waves we exchanged were artifice itself. (113)

Returning to Ireland to visit her father, Mary realized the futility of trying to recapture innocent faith and childhood joys. Her father was as joyless as she. "I should not have come. I was sullen. He was sullen" (116) and neither had succeeded at life. "He lived now on shop bread and like me was converted to tinned and instant foods" (117). Physically and emotionally, their lives lacked nutrients and they relied on the artificial for survival. The Irish landscape provided a consolation for Mary in spite of the people who inhabited it. However, she sorrowfully admits that "There is no magic in homecoming, no handshake, no loving cup. Ah, my little scallywags, you have separateness thrust upon you" (119).

Sadness and longing are revealed through the eyes of another O'Brien heroine, but Mary does not end her monologue in despair. In fact, Mary Hooligan is one of O'Brien's more successful heroines. The confessional has served its purpose this time. She has made her confession and accepts forgiveness and hope as part of the process. O'Brien has used the Church confessional to free her heroine. In the closing pages of the novel, Mary rises physically and mentally from her lethargy in the fourposter bed.

She is alive and hopeful.

> I am in command of an unusual feeling, a liking for everything, especially the day with a nip in it,

> jack frost, the winter treetops cogitating, the sky vivid because polluted. I have that nice feeling that one has after a convalescence, the joints are weak and the head inclined to reel but the worst is over, the lurid fever has been past. (120)

The psychic healing of the confessional continues even when the belief in Catholic ritual has been rejected.

The novel ends on a hopeful note -- a rare occurrence in O'Brien's fiction. Mary strongly declares, "It is time for memory to expire" (121). And the final sentence sends Mary into a new and challenging life ". . . let's live a little before the all embracing dark descends" (121). It is a philosophy that few O'Brien heroines can embrace wholeheartedly. The ties to the past are usually too strong to sever. However, Mary has shed her "sins," received absolution, and is ready for hope.

Using the very rituals, imagery, and language that enveloped her childhood world, O'Brien incorporates and transforms these elements, creating an alternative form of presenting the harshness of the Irish patriarchy. Her heroines become more poignant and realistic because they do not possess the qualities and opportunity to recognize their plight and escape as O'Brien did. She has subverted the iconography and reconfigured the narrative, manipulating traditional concepts to invent new possibilities.

CHAPTER 4 - IRISH MOTHERHOOD AND THE PATRIARCHY

"Mothers were best" (O'Brien, Mother Ireland 50)

"Mothers were best. Mothers worked and worried and sacrificed and had the smallest amounts on their plates when the family sat down to eat" (O'Brien, Mother Ireland 7) -- a perfect description of the idealized Irish mother. This fantastic creation of Irish mythology endures to the present day. Selfless, sacrificial, devoting her entire life to husband and children with generosity and humility, she found her greatest joy in service to her family and, indirectly, to the Church. When her tasks on earth were complete, the Irish mother could anticipate a serene eternity with God and another perfect mother, Mary. So deep rooted was this idealized creation of female as mother fulfilling the feminine nature that the Irish Constitution in Article 14 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 insure that mothers will not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties at home. (Toner 74)

This institutionalization of motherhood in the twentieth century had its roots in the previous century.

> Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, reports from various parliamentary commissions began to indicate that the civilization of Irish society depended not just on giving more power to

> the Catholic Church but on the transformation of Irish women into good mothers. (Ingles 198)

So the concept of the Irish Mother was conceived and nurtured according to a patriarchal construct. At first glance this responsibility thrust on Irish womanhood seemed benign and even generous: women had the opportunity to shape future generations, and the State supported their role. The reality, of course, was much more grim. She was envisioned as a participant in the ruling hierarchies, the guardian of male tradition and morality. Harnessing and manipulating the natural affections of women in family relationships, the State burdened mothers with responsibility for the success of the State. If a mother failed in her duties, the repercussions were felt throughout the nation. The private had become the public domain. Through such patriarchal rhetorical terms as love, duty, honor, respect, and protection, women were entrapped in a prison of words. For example, the wording of Article 14 stated women were so important that they should be protected from having to work outside the home. In reality, the implication was that they must not work outside the home, were not permitted to seek fulfillment outside the confines of the family. In that way, mothers were condemned by the very attributes that made them so revered to smother themselves under the guise of ideal Irish motherhood. The tragedy of the politicalizing and spiritualizing of motherhood is the fact that this role does fulfill the woman's need for personal contact. "According to Nancy Chodorow in The Reproduction of

Mothering, "Familial and kinship ties and family life remain crucial for women" (12). The temptation to accept this distorted image of herself was great, since the rewards in Irish society for compliance were numerous. An Irish mother received praise and adulation from every part of society if her family life was perceived as successful, that is, a husband happy, children well behaved and religious, and her demeanor humble. The ideal seemed easy enough to achieve. The sacrifices of a mother would certainly engender goodness from her family in return. Susan Gorsky echoes this vision of femininity: "Women are traditionally trained to place others' needs first, to feel these needs as their own, their sphere, their satisfaction to be in making it possible for others to use their abilities" (107).

Another pressure to conform came from the fear of failure and rejection. As much as idealized Irish mothers were praised, deviation from the acceptable conventions was condemned in strong terms, both figuratively and literally. A woman who failed to maintain the model of motherhood in her family was ostracized from both the secular and religious communities. As Edna O'Brien described in gripping and appalling detail, the people who inhabited rural Irish villages were demanding and unyielding in their thrust for conformity. Anyone who defied the rigid mores -- through either imagined or real transgressions -- was discussed, dissected, and destroyed. Wayward children, drunken husbands

and, worst of all, a pregnant unwed daughter were all blamed on the failure of a mother, and she suffered for these aberrations. As O'Brien relates in Mother Ireland, "Nothing went unknown or unjudged" (37). The destructive powers of the dominant culture kept many women from resisting. Internalizing the external, they erroneously believed the created construct that they were the cause of family problems. However, even if they acknowledged that the patriarchal structure was flawed and faulty, many were not courageous enough to defy the entrenched society. Irish women embodied the elements in Corneillon's statement about women in general, "Women frequently go to self denying, self distorting lengths to force themselves into the mold" (13). It is these truncated mothers whose frustrations and pain were veiled behind the lovely Irish landscape that O'Brien evoked in her fiction. These mothers could not escape even when they realized the tremendous inequities and moral bankruptcy of the motherhood myth. Elaine Showalter expresses the generalization about women that O'Brien particularizes in Irish women. "The woman who allows herself to imagine beyond the categories provided for her by social codes generates dissatisfaction which life rarely allows her to dispel" (1985: 254).

Coupled with the politicizing and institutionalizing of Irish motherhood was the overwhelming pressure of spirituality in the form of the Catholic Church. "Church and State worked hand in hand to protect Catholic morality and institutionalize

the Catholic family" (Beal 7). The double patriarchy -- Church and State -- coopted women's most fundamental potency, the ability to insure immortality through the creation of life. In essence, they subverted female power for their own agenda. According to Inglis in Moral Monopoly:

> It was mainly the priests and nuns who from the middle of the nineteenth century began to define the tasks of mothers and supervise them in their new roles . . . and through the control of sex the modern Irish mother and family was established (199)
>
> and continues to the present day.
>
> This priority given to duties in the home is very much in line with the Church's view that women's role in life is fulfilled as mother and home-maker. The Church with its powerful societal influence reinforces the laws of the State in their formation and ramifications of the attitudes of the men and women in our society. (MacCurtain and O'Corrain 86)

As stated in previous chapters, the overwhelming power of the Church to influence its followers cannot be denied. While the State can only punish the body of criminals, the Catholic Church carries the promise of eternal damnation of the soul for earthly sins. It is one thing to be punished on earth, and quite another to risk an eternity in Hell or, at the very least, long terms of suffering in Purgatory.

According to Jenny Beal, in Women in Ireland Voices of Change, "The Church presented motherhood as a vocation, as the greatest calling for women apart from religious life" (50). Adding to the spirituality of motherhood was the vision of motherhood incarnate, the Blessed Mother Mary. This sacred icon was offered up to Irish mothers and those who accepted

the role model retained an exalted position in society. Mary was the perfect vision of the patriarchal construct of motherhood. Submissive to God (the Father) and her Son, Mary believed in the supremacy of the family and never questioned authority. In addition, she did not succumb to sexual temptation since she was perceived as chaste even in her marriage to Joseph. Totally devoted to Jesus, as a sacrificing and saintly parent, she set an impossible standard for her finite, struggling sisters on earth. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church continually cited the attributes of Mary as an archetype for Irish women, insisting that with love and sacrifice perfect motherhood could be achieved on earth. And why not? After all, sacrifice is at the very core of Catholic doctrine and is infused with sentiment and self-satisfaction. Young Irish women were imbued with the myriad Biblical stories, with the sermons on spirituality. They had seen the holy images of Mary in the stable with baby Jesus in the manger, of her weeping at the foot of the cross, and of her miraculous assumption into heaven surrounded by a multitude of angels. (Implicitly, the compensation for perfect motherhood was heaven itself, without the pain of death). Unfortunately, the problem with the images was the fact that reality never penetrated the mystical aura. For example, in the Christmas story, the priests never mentioned the realities of childbirth - the contractions, the blood, the pain - as Mary attempted to expel Jesus into the human world. Instead, the vision of a

serene mother, perfectly clad in blue with a halo surrounding her beautiful face, implied painless childbirth.

Of course, the dreadful details of Christ's Passion were gleefully told -- every pounding of the nails into Jesus's flesh -- but the intensity of the physical pain did not penetrate the lyrical, vivid language of the sacred drama. Therefore, the reality of sacrifice was radically different from the illusion of sacrifice. In addition, when the words love and sacrifice are used as synonyms, interchangeable ideals, then pain and denial are raised to another level of understanding. The tortures of motherhood, both physical and mental, are represented as endurable and even enriching because of familial love for husband and children.

Indeed, the impetus to believe was irresistible to most Irish mothers, who had no knowledge of alternative worlds and who would easily succumb. In a constricted and controlled universe with few satisfactions, a mother would easily surrender to the compelling image of a happy matriarch surrounded by a loving husband and perfect, obedient offspring. Additionally, this vision perpetuated the myth of mother as powerful figure, and women sought that identity no matter how illusionary it was. In reality, there was no actual ability to alter the course of the patriarchal system, but mothers did not have the resources to acknowledge their limitations. Speaking of women in patriarchy, Gayle Greene acknowledges, "Women have internalized the ideology of the

oppressor, indoctrinating their children of both sexes in the very values by which they themselves have been indoctrinated to subordination" (1985: 14). But as Sandra Gilbert writes in The Madwoman in the Attic, "To be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead. Life has no story in death-in-life" (25). This is why O'Brien qualifies her paean to her mother, " . . . mothers went to the confraternity on a Sunday evening and whispered things to each other in the chapel grounds about their wombs and woes" (Mother Ireland 75).

Coupled with sacrifice was the concept of guilt. Similar to the myth of Irish motherhood, the folklore, fiction, and humor surrounding Irish guilt -- for sex, for parenthood, for EVERYTHING -- have begun to border on parody and platitudes. Nevertheless, the power of guilt, especially guilt stemming from religion, permanently alters perceptions and behavior. "Guilt is the private and hidden legacy of Catholicism even in women who have long since relinquished their faith" (Beal 52). O'Brien's mothers, reflecting the author's own experiences, are infused with guilt and spend their lives trying to free themselves from the perceptions of the past. O'Brien confesses to Nell Dunn in Talking to Women:

> What's terrible and in a way more hard for us is, with my mind I know what is intelligent and liberating and good and with my instincts and automatic behaviour I revert back to what my mother did and what my grandmother and everything, you know this thing of clinging on like a barnacle on a rock, to a man. (86)

In some cases, the most poignant, the most ignorant Irish

mothers cannot even verbalize their uneasiness and search in vain for explanations. In this self punishment, the Irish mother mirrors the confusion of women in a repressive society. "She is conditioned to see herself at fault, and not the cultural idea. And she is taught to feel shame and guilt for her deviation" (Corneillon 113). Through sacrifice and guilt, the culture and religion united to assure the compliance of Irish women in the myth of Irish motherhood.

The redefining of such a natural instinct as motherhood into a sacrosanct and exalted tenet of Irishness must have a purpose. The rationalization for this transformation is embedded in the philosophy of power and control. "The family not only merely mirrors the order in the state and educates its children to follow it, it also creates and constantly reinforces that order" (Lerner, The Creation of Patriarchy 217). The Irish mothers unknowingly cooperated in the continuance of patriarchal authority, initiating the children into ruling ideology. Fueled by their own indoctrination in childhood and absence of alternative ideals, the Irish mother functioned in accordance with the prevailing traditions. The religious tenets, especially, were reinforced through family ritual and convent education. Rural Irish girls were taught to be future Irish mothers by the women they most trusted -- their own mothers, and the nuns. Irish mothers recreated themselves in the name of the Father (God the Father). Janet Todd, in Women Writers Talking, discusses this lack of female

identity, "If the mother is an alienator, it is because she has no identity as a woman" (1985: 238).

Sheltered from the outside world and raised in a ghettoized, isolated community, the young girls experienced no alternative authority to offer a choice. Even if such a choice existed, who would believe strangers rather than family, friends, and Church? Acceptance, praise, recognition and, best of all, eternal joy were their remunerations for passivity and compliance. All that the Irish mothers had to do was get through life -- one deadly, stifling day after another. In Mother Ireland, O'Brien remembers the influences of the reigning status quo. About her village, she remembers:

> Life was fervid, enclosed and catastrophic. The spiritual food consisted of the crucifies Christ. His Passion impinged on every thought, word, deed and omission, and sometimes in the mild fancifulness of childhood it was as if one caught sight of HIM on a hill stretched out upon a Cross betwixt thieves, with women at the foot of it, gnashing and weeping. (28-9)

Indeed, the imagery was extraordinarily powerful for such susceptible young children.

Naturally curious, the girls in convent school often whispered about forbidden sex and idealized romantic stories. Here again, the authoritarian nuns destroyed any attempt by the girls to experiment with controversial viewpoints by attaching the onus of sin to the most mundane actions and harmless thoughts. Of her convent experience, O'Brien observes:

> Sins got committed by the hour, sins of thought, word, deed and the sin of eating, nay devouring an illicit tart from the cookery kitchen, the sin of smiling at a nun and having bad "thoughts" about her such as brushing against her hood, the sin of sprinkling castor sugar onto the palm of one's hand and licking it to one's heart's content, the dreaded sin of consulting the mirror and then hawing on it to give oneself a dramatic look. (Mother Ireland 66-7)

Such normal, childhood pleasures were suddenly fused with profound choices of good and evil. To this day O'Brien recalls the excesses of her experiences. At a recent reading, she told the audience, "Religious fervor was extreme. I was always punishing myself. I was also very afraid -- afraid of God and man -- a very poor start." (O'Brien, Reading at the Folger Library, 1995). O'Brien managed to overcome her past; too many others could not.

Anticipating the girls' inevitable experimentation with forbidden ideas, the nuns continually warned them about the dangers to their immortal souls, especially from reading questionable materials.

> Then we were warned about literature, told how writers were arch hands at depicting immodesty, in flaming imagery, relating the most obscene details, describing the worst carnal vices with subtle analysis and adorning them with all the brilliance and allurements of style so that nothing was left inviolate. (Mother Ireland 69)

Powerful images stifled individualism and freedom. Educated in the tradition of the dual patriarchy, many young girls grew up to become Irish mothers, paragons of virtue and obedience, devoid of natural emotions and human spirit.

> It is no easy thing being an Irish female. She is dealt a double injustice. Marriage is harder to come by and fraught with greater burdens than in most other Western countries, and yet there is little scope for a woman's talents outside marriage. (Connery 194)

To categorize O'Brien's mothers is a difficult task. Each character while having the common heritage of an Irish childhood still remains unique. Every Irish mother faces her ordeals alone, and this spectrum of lives allows the individuals to document their particular pain. As stated before, O'Brien does not write about communities of women. Instead, most of her heroines are isolated and solitary. Although occasional confidantes are created, as Baba to Kate in The Country Girl Trilogy, the friendships are not sustained as each confronts life alone. Her mothers represent the panorama of life-experiences from those who are forever trapped in their rural villages to those who physically escape their communities but remain psychically bound to their pasts. Among O'Brien's characterizations are disillusioned young mothers, burdensome mothers, rejected mothers, women who remember their mothers, and older mothers who cannot comprehend or articulate how they failed the myth of motherhood.

O'Brien utilizes a number of narrative techniques to create her vivid portraits. Sometimes the stories are told through the voices of young girls, innocently commenting and sometimes condemning their mothers' actions. Some women confess their resentment and their inability to sympathize

with their mothers. Still other stories are narrated by mothers of sons, a special and often tragic relationship that reveals the depth of patriarchal conditioning. Most are written from a confessional point of view, intimate revelations of dark emotions about the primal familial relationship.

> In modern times the mother-daughter relationship which lies at the base of educating heroinism undergoes a characteristic twist - now it is not the parents' but the childs' viewpoint which dominates. (Moers 233)

O'Brien employs the voices of young girls to crush the myth of glorified Irish motherhood. The mothers do not reveal themselves so much as they are revealed by their daughters. This striking technique of using daughters as observers discloses a situation both ironic and disturbing. Through first-person narratives, the legacy of the mother's influence is echoed in the judgements of the daughters. The girls criticize and condemn their mothers, judging them by the patriarchal construct of the idealized Irish mother. Ironically, the limited insight created by cultural conditioning often destroys the intimate mother-daughter relationship, one which the mothers cherish as symbols of their success. A vicious cycle of women critical of women develops, when attempting to exist under male-constructed images.

When does reality first impose itself on the happiness of innocence and forever alter the future? O'Brien takes up this

theme of innocence disintegrated and creates a poignant story of a child's encounter with a less-than-ideal mother. "My Mother's Mother," from the collection of short stories Returning, reveals in first person narrative the plight of a young girl who must confront the duality of perfect-imperfect mother. The girl begins, "I loved my mother but yet I was glad when the time came to go to her mother's house each summer" (24). The author repeats the word mother rather than grandmother to emphasize the subtle relationship of mothers generationally. Egocentric and totally absorbed in her vision of the world, the young girl cannot fathom an alternative landscape. Indeed, she took her mother's love for granted as most children do. With a great deal of superiority, she even daydreams:

> Sitting with them [grandparents] at night I thought that maybe I would not go home at all. Maybe I would never lie in bed next to my mother, the two of us shivering with expectancy and with terror. Maybe I would forsake my mother. (25)

Subtle realities of Irish home life (sleeping with mother) seep through even the most benign descriptions. The young girl is her mother's surrogate love in a country where intimacy between husband and wife is not encouraged.

The story reveals other subtleties about relationships in rural Ireland. Although the young girl's mother continues the rituals of religion, the essence of the Faith (love, forgiveness) is lacking in family life. When the grandfather dies, the parents attend the funeral. The narrator comments on

her mother's attire at the funeral rather than mentioning her grandfather. In a few sentences, O'Brien details the ironic situation:

> My mother looked older in black, and I wished she had worn a georgette scarf, something to give her a bit of brightness around the throat. She did not like it when I said that and sent me off to say a Confiteor and three Hail Marys. Her eyes were dry. She did not love her own father. Neither did I. (31)

The understated emotion is poignant.

When her mother fails to visit, the narrator begins to feel insecure and decides to run back to her home. Suddenly, she realizes that her mother can exist without her, a disturbing thought. Her mother returns and the child naturally expects a loving welcome for her selfless devotion and worry. After all, "The idealized Catholic mother is . . . also expected to protect and forgive her children, and display the virtues of humility, gentleness and mercy" (Beal 50). Instead, her mother is annoyed and treats her daughter's fears with disdain. "The bicycle got punctures she said and then asked did I think that with bunions, corns and welts she could walk six miles after doing a day's work?" (39) So the Irish mother is not totally devoted to her child's welfare, as the myth had perpetuated. The story concludes with a realization that mothers are not sacrificial, that they lead lives outside the realm of their children. On the surface, this story seems to illustrate a fairly straightforward coming-of-age motif, but O'Brien adds a twist that reveals the cultural construct of

motherhood. Rather than accept her mother's flaws, the girl wants to punish the human mother and create an illusion of perfection through memory. She admits that she loves her mother but cannot reconcile the myth with the devastating truth.

> I thought how much I needed to be without her so that I could think of her, dwell on her, and fashion her into the perfect person that she clearly was not. I resolved that for certain I would grow up and one day go away. It was a sweet thought and it was packed with punishment. (40)

The subtext reveals daughters punishing mothers when they (the mothers) do not adhere to the myth established by the dominating culture.

Another narrative that mines the depths of despair for the rural mother is "The Rug," a short story in The Love Object. Not only is this narrative poignant but the understated pain is heartrending. O'Brien creates a simple tale of mistake and regret. Through the haze of memory, a young girl recalls life in her rural home and the common joys she experienced. However, hovering in the background is the saga of a restricted and pitiable mother who tries to live the myth of motherhood. The stereotypical situations are obvious.

> My father might fritter his life away . . . but, within, that safe, square, lowland house of stone was my mother's pride and joy. It was always spotless. It was stuffed with things - furniture, china, dogs, Toby mugs, trays, tapestries and whatnots. (63)

Her mother's possessions were the stuff of souvenir shops and bargain stores. And presiding over all was the religious

imagery. "Each of the four bedrooms had holy pictures on the walls . . ." (63). Grasping the magnitude of the Irish mother's servitude is a simple idea: "She had early accepted that she had been born to do the work" (64).

The story centers on the arrival of a parcel containing a black sheepskin rug. Suddenly, mystery enters the family's routine, predictable lives. Speculation about who sent the rug excites them, particularly the mother. She had always wanted a rug to cover the linoleum floors, and this gift brought her great joy. "Though she was always hoping, she never really expected things to turn out well" (67). This small gift that carried such pleasure had conflicting interpretations. In a patriarchal construct, the mother was fulfilling her role as humble person, taking care of her family, and finding pleasure in the smallest rewards. The second interpretation is more realistic and bitter. This woman had so little to fulfill her life that the arrival of a surprise package took on momentous implications. She now had something to engage her thoughts. She spent hours trying to decide who sent the package, finally settling for some long-ago visitors. She sent a letter, and they, in turn, replied that they had not sent the rug. Two important moments define the depth of feeling connected with the rug.

> In the warm evenings we sat around the fireplace- we'd never had a fire in that room throughout the whole of my childhood - and around the rug, listening to the radio . . . I looked into the window and saw Mama kneeling on the rug saying a

> prayer. I'd never seen her pray like that, in the middle of the day, before. (68)

The rug had transformed her life and become a symbol for hope and beauty.

Of course, the culmination of all this hope is soon destroyed by the arrival of the owner. The package had been mistakenly delivered to the wrong address. The narrator's tone is one of simplicity, understating the tragedy of a despairing life. "There could be no more doubt about it. Her whole being drooped - shoulders, stomach, voice, everything" (72), the vision of one sinking into oblivion. However, the saddest commentary comes from the mother herself. Rebellion and anger, these emotion have been subdued and trampled so long ago that she can do nothing but blame herself. "As she watched him go down the avenue she wept, not so much for the loss - though the loss was enormous - as for her own foolishness in thinking that someone had wanted to do her a kindness at last" (72). She had internalized the message of worthlessness and could not articulate her despair. Characteristic of O'Brien, the unsaid is the most dramatic. Resorting to cliche, the mother can only say, "We live and learn" (72), but her actions expose the depth of hopelessness. She undoes her apron strings and then reties them slowly and tighter, strangling herself. The knot that has surrounded her entire life, the knot that she thought she could bear, has become even stronger and more constricting. She had tasted happiness, but it had been snatched away, leaving her wretched and miserable. The irony

is overwhelming. She could have survived barely in her meager existence and even fooled herself into believing she was a success. However, once the rug arrived, her life changed forever; she could not return to the ignorance of the past. The narrator ends the memory on a note of resignation, filled with unarticulated anger. The Irish mother has tasted failure again.

As much as young daughters innocently or matter-of-factly reveal their mothers, it is the more mature ones who penetrate the wall of tradition and rebel against their mothers, sometimes savagely. In O'Brien's fiction, mothers and daughters clash. However, it is more than the usual disagreements and generational problems. The daughters recognize that they have been manipulated by the patriarchal society and that their mothers have been the prime conspirators with the patriarchy. Complete separation from such a powerful vestige of childhood is impossible, yet remaining within the maternal sphere is also an impossibility. These types of daughters are caught between two worlds and are typical O'Brien heroines.

In the story "Cords" from The Love Object, the third-person narrator wants to convey the suffering of two people who can no longer communicate. The title "Cords" refers to the umbilical cord, attached and giving life but, at the same time, strangulating. As the tale unfolds, each character has the opportunity to present his or her interpretation of the

relationship. The mother is a paradigm of her upbringing. She is critical of her daughter because "she'd lost her faith and she mixed with queer people and wrote poems" (115). This last "occasion of sin" echoes back to O'Brien's personal experiences with the dangers of writing. The tone of sarcasm is apparent as the narrator capsualizes the basic tenet of motherhood.

> 'All Irish planes are blessed, they never crash' she said, believing totally in the God that created her, sent her this venial husband, a largish farmhouse, hens, hardships, and one daughter who'd changed, become moody, and grown away from them completely. (116)

Religion, superstition and an ungrateful daughter are all the elements of Irish drama.

The mother is visiting her daughter Claire whom she has not seen for over a year. The visit is doomed from the beginning because neither can overcome the resentments that plague their relationship. The mother maintains her country ways, irritating Claire. Her mother's visit recalls the resentments of childhood, and Claire cannot help herself as she continues to rebel. Her mother's voice bothers her, and the simple country presents she brought are also annoying. "A chicken, bread, eggs, a tapestry of a church spire which she'd done all winter, stitching at it until she was almost blind, a holy water font . . . " (117), all symbols of her mother's mean life. When they speak about her father, the mother defends him, praising God for the husband's rescue from alcohol. The narrator reports that "Claire thought bitterly

that God had taken too long to help the thin frustrated man" (118). The characteristics of the Irish mother keep appearing. She had the same rosary beads for years: she resorts to banalities when confronted with an untenable position, "Show me your friends and I know who you are" (124), and naturally inflicts guilt when reason fails. "I am a good mother, I did everything I could, and this is all the thanks I get" (125).

Creating the character of an Irish mother is tricky and occasionally comes perilously close to parody. When the mother in "Cords" attends Mass with her daughter, the narrator states, Going in her mother took a small liqueur bottle from her handbag and filled it with holy water from the font" (128). Of course, the ironic symbolism is obvious, the totally inappropriate vessel for sacred liquid. However, O'Brien manages to overcome the pitfalls of stereotype to create a realistic character. Religion is so ingrained in the mother's subconscious that retrieving the holy water becomes paramount regardless of the means used to secure it. The worn rosary beads and even the "guilt trips" are all part of her defense in a confusing world. She certainly does not understand her daughter's behavior, can never comprehend the generational rejection of her traditional values. The daughter also is struggling. She had left her pastoral home only to find an unfulfilling life in the city. O'Brien expresses well the ambivalence of the woman, both wanting to accept, and at the same time, forced to reject her mother's culture. She had

invited her mother to spend some time to try and rekindle lost affection. As so often happens in the real world, such good intentions fail. Claire feels the tension immediately. When her mother gives her the gifts, "They both stood with tears in their eyes, savouring these seconds of tenderness, knowing that it would be short-lived" (118). And it is. The visit triggers unhappy childhood memories for the adult Claire. "Since her mother's arrival, every detail of her childhood kept dogging her" (126).

Mannerisms and opinions aside, Claire cannot forgive her mother for instilling in her the cultural constructs that forever affect her life. The climax of the story occurs when Claire invites guests. She knows her mother will not approve of these people, a husband, a wife, and his pregnant mistress, yet she proceeds with the evening. This subconscious attempt to embarrass and insult her mother indicates the unbelievable complexity of mother - daughter relationships. As the group interacts, Claire is ashamed of her mother, while the mother tries desperately to fit into Claire's world. The narrator foreshadows the approaching confrontation: "The petals were already dying on the mantel shelf" (123). After the guests leave, Claire and her mother quarrel. "She [Claire] said hurtful things about her mother being narrow minded and cruel" (124). This need for revenge echoes back to the young girl in "Her Mother's Mother," finally punishing her mother for lack of perfection. For, in truth, Claire had felt awkward about

the guests, too. She cannot escape the perspective of the past, cannot free herself to be comfortable with others from a different background.

> She wanted them to go. She could not confide in them even though they were old friends. They might sneer. They were not friends anymore than the ex-lovers, they were all social appendages . . . There was no one she trusted (124)

not even her mother. The legacy of the Irish mother is felt in the lost daughter, who is self-conscious and lonely in the modern world. "Her mother had no notion of how lonely it was to read manuscripts all day . . . And then to constantly go out, seeking people, hoping that one of them might fit, might know the shorthand of her, body and soul" (125).

Hope fails as neither mother nor daughter is reconciled. The irony is that Claire is her mother's daughter. She resorts to the techniques imbedded in childhood in an effort to alter her mother's perceptions. In a conflict of generations, no one wins. The mother decides to return home earlier and Claire lukewarmly protests. At the airport, O'Brien's understated prose is filled with grief and unfulfilled redemption.

> At the barrier they kissed... each registering the other's sorrow. 'I'll write to you, I'll write oftener,' Claire said, and for a few minutes she stood there waving, weeping, not aware that the visit was over and that she could go back to her own life now, such as it was. (130)

The subliminal message is received -- intimate and loving relationships between Irish mothers and daughters are not viable. Resentments and clash of cultures are too strong to

redeem. What is left is an eternal sorrow for the unattainable.

Elaine Showalter comments on the significance of a mother's death in women's literature.

> As the death of the father has always been an archetypal rite of passage for the western hero, now the death of the mother as witnessed and transformed by the daughter has become one of the most profound occasions for female literature. (1985: 135)

One of O'Brien's most famous and poignant stories echoes Showalter's assertion. The death of the Irish mother serves as a touchstone for her daughter. The loss of a mother is tragic enough, but the Irish mother's death is especially devastating. In "Cords" the narrator dramatizes the symbolic death of a mother - daughter bond. However, in "A Rose in the Heart" from Mrs. Reinhardt and Other Stories, the speaker details the slow death of both a relationship and the mother herself. In O'Brien's creative way of intertwining her stories, the title is taken from an embroidered picture mentioned in her novel A Pagan Place. "There is a rose in the heart of New York" (29). This short story is complex, employing striking, lyrical descriptions and understated comments on Irish life. The tone is matter-of-fact, almost historical, as if the characters were more stereotypes than individuals, another usual tale signifying the Irish plight. Yet O'Brien creates the particular in the general. These characters become real as their story unfolds in chronological order. The mood of the setting is elegiac as befits the

inevitable climax, the mother's death.

The story begins in darkness and muted tones pervade the text. "December night . . . It was a blue room - walls of dark met morose blue, furniture made of walnut, including the bed on which the event was taking place" (109). The "event" was the birth of a daughter. Unlike the seemingly effortless birth of Jesus, this mother's agony is portrayed in grisly detail. Birth as it really is -- screaming, unbearable pain, loss of dignity. Even in such a primal occurrence as birth, the pressures on the Irish mother to behave properly are apparent. Trying to be as humble as an Irish woman should be, the mother "apologizes to the midwife for the untoward commotion, said sorry in a gasping whisper, and then was seized again by the pain, that at different times she described as being a knife, a dagger, a Hell on earth" (109). The narrator comments on the mother's sex life that led to this agony. ""She has been pried apart, again and again, with not a word to her, not a little endearment, only rammed through and told to shut up" (109). When this pitiable mother gives birth to a less than healthy baby girl, she blames herself "regarding her whole life as a vast disappointment" (112). The insertion of religious imagery to try and make sense of this gruesome process is especially sorrowful. In subtle, ironic symbolism, the mother bites on a crucifix to alleviate the pain. When her "torn flesh" is being stitched up (without benefit of anesthesia), "The mother roared again and

said this indeed was her vinegar and gall. She bit into the crucifix and dented it further" (112). The motif of sacrifice, literally and figuratively, is exposed.

After this shocking introduction, the story proceeds through the years in which, as O"Brien said, "Mothers were best" (Mother Ireland 75). The child and mother were inseparable, as the mother taught her daughter the cultural traditions and taboos. "Catholic mothers were important. They were the primary religious figure in the home - the last but vital link in the Catholic formation of each new generation. They were responsible for adherence to rules" (Inglis 68).

The young girl adored her mother and they shared everything, even the bed. The father, as in most O'Brien stories, is missing, or when present, drunk and abusive. In fact, the mother even leaves for a while, a courageous act, but soon returns to her duty which included sex on demand. "Her mother went along to her father's bedroom, for a tick, to stop him bucking" (119). Therefore, in her formative years, the young girl learns to distrust men and fear sex. In addition to religious indoctrination, the mother teaches domestic chores, cleaning windows, protecting floors from the men's muddy boots. The undercurrent here is one of submissiveness to the male culture. The mother is passive, gaining her greatest satisfaction from household chores and raising her daughters. At this point there is no hint of hidden longing and a desire to achieve beyond the domestic.

When the girl begins to mature, the inevitable repercussions of her upbringing appear. Some are quite humorous and ironically touching. When she says the word "backside" to herself, she feels that she deserves punishment. Mimicking O'Brien's real-life experiences, "As a dire punishment she took cups of glauber salts three times a day, choosing to drink it when it was lukewarm and most nauseating" (121). Such drastic self-mortification for a little random thought only reinforces the warped outlook that was the Irish girls' lot. However, the girl did not yet fully understand the negative influence of her childhood. The idyllic relationship with her mother continues until she goes to convent school. There the nuns become surrogate mothers, reinforcing the patriarchal traditions.

The progression of life inevitably influences the relationship for the worst. The daughter and mother grow apart as the mother maintains her beliefs while her daughter tries to overcome her past. The intimate conversations of childhood yield to "surface" talk with no real depth. "But they said none of the things that they should have said" (127). Yet the mother continues to try to influence her daughter's life. When the daughter's marriage dissolves, the mother insists that she avoid men "body and soul."

Similarities exist between "A Rose in the Heart" and "Cords." Both daughters try to rekindle their former closeness to their mothers by taking them on a holiday. The results are

the same, failure to overcome the wall of change. The inability to communicate becomes the most lamentable aspect of the characters in both narratives. The mothers and daughters clash as their opposing viewpoints are starkly revealed. An episode in "A Rose in the Heart" demonstrates this unbreachable chasm. When the mother and daughter visit a ruined monastery, the mother immediately bestows on the shattered stones an aura of religious mystery. "She genuflected" (132). The daughter, on the other hand, stripped of her former beliefs, sees "a ruin, unhallowed, full of weeds and buzzing with wasps and insects" (132). The parallel yearnings of each woman only underscore the abyss between them. " 'I think you're very unsettled,' her mother said." The retort was meant to sting. " 'I didn't get that from the ground,' the daughter said" (135). And again "She wished then that her mother's life had been happier, and had not exacted so much from her and she felt she was being milked emotionally" (135). The mother, conversely, "wished that her daughter had never grown into the cruel feelingless hussy that she was" (135). Finally, when confronted by her inadequacies, the mother resorts to guilt as the ultimate revenge against the unanswerable and foreshadows the inevitable conclusion. "When I pass on, I won't be sorry" (135).

The psychic death of the relationship is complete and the physical death of the mother follows. The daughter is not present when her mother passes away and can only respond with

a deep regret for lost affection. In a bizarre plot twist, the undertaker asks if she wants to see her mother's body, and this scene vividly portrays the utter despair of lost moments in time. The mother's eye is not fully closed. "She thought why did she have to withdraw, why do people have to withdraw, why?"(139). That question assumes the howl of a cosmic scream, a despairing of human contact.

Earlier in the story, the daughter had attempted to elicit personal details about her mother's hopes and dreams. A story about a lost love from fifty-five years ago abruptly ends, and the daughter remains frustrated in her quest for information. Later, while rummaging through her mother's humble possessions, she finds a letter to the "lost love." One line reveals the depth of her mother's frustrated and unfulfilled desires: "I think of you, you would not believe how often" (139). How often had her mother dreamed of this man, despaired of her tragic decision to return to Ireland instead of marrying in America? The daughter can only wonder. In the room are the remnants of a wanting life, colorful hats and imitation bags and furs. Of course, the subtle symbolism of a life of imitation culturally, spiritually, and materially is evident. Her mother did not possess anything of value; she was even an imitation of all Irish mothers. Yet from the litany of her meager belongings it is apparent the she had had wants and desires. Unfortunately, they had been silenced long

age when she "came back to Ireland, back to her destiny" (139).

The final touch of sadness occurs when the daughter discovers an old, dusty envelope, containing trinkets and money, addressed to her. Her mother speaks from beyond the grave, leaving a haunting legacy. However, there is no note. The last attempt at communication has been lost, and silence reigns.

The previous stories described daughters who mature to resent their mothers. What happens if a mother dies, leaving the daughter with a totally idealistic remembrance of motherhood, one she can never emulate or overcome? Such a dilemma exists in O'Brien's most famous novels, The Country Girl Trilogy, three novels that are linked by the ongoing experience of the main characters, Caithleen (Kate) and Baba, and provide a deeper analysis of mothers' influences on daughters. The difference here is that Caithleen Brady's mother is an ever-present shade from eternity and memory in the background of her daughter's life. Her mother drowned when Caithleen was young, and the physical presence of her mother is replaced with mythical remembrances. Unlike the women in the previous stories, Caithleen loses her mother before she is disillusioned, before she inevitably recognizes the reality of Irish motherhood. She maintains belief in the flawed traditions because she never has the opportunity to see her mother through the prism of adulthood. Her mother is forever

frozen in the time frame when mothers are perceived as infallible.

Her mother had the appropriate sacrificial qualities: "'Did you sleep?' I asked Mama. 'No. You had a sweet in your mouth and I was afraid you'd choke if you swallowed it whole, so I stayed awake just in case'" (5). Throughout the first chapters of The Country Girls, Caithleen describes her mother's attributes and continuously quotes her simplistic axioms. "Weep and you weep alone" (11). Her innocent, happy country life is shattered when her mother's drowning is announced at a dance. There is the hint of scandal because her mother was with a man (not her husband) when she died.

However, Caithleen is concerned with fulfilling her obligations as a good Irish girl even in the face of tragedy. "My voice was hysterical and then I realized that I was being rude to the parish priest, and I asked again, only more gently" (40). Decorum must be maintained at all times. The death of her childhood occurs on that day. She loses the chance to undergo the metamorphosis of maturation. In this way, she never comes to understand the reality of Irish motherhood. Caithleen refers to her childhood experiences referentially, always judging herself in terms of her flawed role model; she cannot escape the conditioning of her youth.

The motif of drowning -- immersion in water -- occurs often in O'Brien's work and echoes back to stories from Irish mythology when being set adrift was a form of punishment. The

parallels seem inevitable since Caithleen's mother was in a questionable, perhaps illicit, relationship when she died. Cosmic punishment for a perceived mortal sin of adultery reinforces the merging of Irish myth, culture, and religion. For Caithleen, a little too young to understand the symbolic overtones, the horror is the fact that she cannot visit her mother's grave. She is frustrated in her efforts to perform the rituals of a dutiful and loving daughter.

With her mother enshrined of memory, Caithleen has to rely on others for the formation of self. The patriarchal mandates that were emplanted by her mother are reinforced through convent school and the local townspeople. Jack Holland, a shopkeeper who secretly covets her, reiterates the cultural/religious behavior that is expected of Irish women. He writes to her, "And, my dear Caithleen, who is the image and continuation of her mother, I see no reason why you shall not return [from convent school] and inherit your mother's home and carry on her admirable domestic tradition" (81). With little experience of an alternative world, Caithleen is caught in a time-warp from which she will not escape. As Lorna Sage comments, "Caithleen is rooted in the parish of the past. Her life - like her mother's - will be spent in yearning and passionate muddle" (105). Her one hope is her friend Baba, the rebellious woman who is not afraid to defy authority. The two girls offer a dual view of Irishness, the submissive and the passionate, the sacred and the profane. The girls are the

legacies of their mothers. Baba's was the realistic Irish woman, fallible, frustrated, and despairing. Caithleen commented on her friend's parent when she stayed at their home during Christmas: "She was paying back for all the gay nights that she'd spent down at the hotel, her legs crossed, her tongue tasting thick, expensive liquor. She and Mr. Brennen slept in separate beds" (91). Baba's mother represents a realistic Irish woman according to O'Brien. "Life has passed her by, cheated her. She was just forty" (120). As a result of her imperfect mother, Baba brutally rejects pious portrayals of country women. Caithleen's mother, conversely, is a social construct, the idealized mother of culture and religion. Therefore, Caithleen does not have the opportunity to separate the ideal from the real, and she is doomed to fail.

The specter never leaves her, especially when she feebly ventures to ignore cultural and religious tenets. When the young girl explores her emerging sexuality with Mr. Gentleman (a handsome, married man from her village), the guilt is pervasive. "I thought of Mama, and I could see her shaking her head woefully. Always when I was with him, I thought of Mama" (116). Even in such an innocent decision as ordering a drink, mother speaks from beyond the grave. "'What'll I drink?' I asked and in the distance somewhere in my head I heard my mother's voice accusing me, and I saw her shake her finger at me. There were tears in her eyes. Tears of reproach" (147). Her mother becomes the mythical guardian angel whispering in

her ear whenever she aspires to develop beyond her constricted childhood. The jovial and exuberant tone of Caithleen's voice as she and Baba begin their adventures in Dublin, supposedly free of the rural village constraints, is deceiving. All too quickly, the optimistic attitudes must bow to the sadness and despair born of a frustrated childhood. In spite of her girlish enthusiasm, Caithleen's psyche is permeated with the images and language of the past. Even in little, innocuous moments, the flood of guilt, sin, and pain pours forth. When she and Baba decide to purchase some black brassieres, Caithleen comments on the appearance of the salesgirl: "pale, pure rosary-bead hands held the flimsy, black, sinful garment between her fingers, and the fingers were ashamed" (142), and so was Caithleen.

The irony of some of Caithleen's experiences indicates the double standard imposed on all women and especially Irish women. After a night of fighting off a drunken seducer, she returns home to find her older, married "suitor" waiting for her. In spite of the fact that he himself is on the verge of committing adultery, Mr. Gentleman admonishes her for staying out late and drinking. For a brief moment she exhibits a power that he is not used to. To counteract this burst of righteous indignation, he quickly regains his superior position by referring to her as "You funny little girl." Caithleen is once again consigned to the triviality of childhood.

Throughout the first novel, she exhibits the excitement

of innocence moving toward experience, and throughout the trilogy, the voices follow her. When Mr. Gentleman wants to see her body, she remarks, "And if I'm not nice, then will you change your mind? I had inherited my mother's suspiciousness" (164). And even though Caithleen seems to enjoy her excursion into the forbidden world of sex, Mr. Gentleman understands the depth of rural indoctrination. "'I like being a bad girl,' I replied, wide eyed. No, not really, darling. You're sweet . . . my country girl" (165). The country girl will always remain. Of course, Caithleen is disappointed and filled with despair when Mr. Gentleman does not keep their lovers' assignation. The romantic has been tarnished, but not destroyed. The first novel, The Country Girls, ends on an unhappy note, and Caithleen's confusion continues in the next two novels.

In the second novel, The Lonely Girls, Caithleen's tragic journey through life continues. She meets her future husband Eugene but does not relinquish her guilt as she tries to forge her own identity. "I felt guilty on and off, because I was so happy with him and because I seldom saw my mother happy and laughing" (202). Another significant event occurs when she begins to date Eugene Gaillard. He renames her. Coopting her identity as an individual, "He called me Kate, as he said that Caithleen was too 'Kiltartan' for his liking - whatever that meant" (202). Caithleen surrenders herself to Eugene body and soul, and he imposes his vision of Irish womanhood on her. Of course, she allows this subjugation to take place. For the

rest of this novel and the third one in the trilogy, Caithleen Brady becomes Kate Brady, fashioned by others. This ability to give everything to others is reminiscent of her mother's influence.

> My mother is dead . . . I wanted to say something else, something that would convey the commonplace sacrifice of her life: of her shoulder permanently drooping from carrying buckets of hen food, of her keeping bars of chocolate under the bolster so that I could eat them in bed if I got frightened of Dada or of the wind. (203)

Mother again interferes in the consummation of her sexual relationship with Eugene. "He loaned me a white flannel nightgown with rosebuds on it, which was exactly like one my mother kept in a trunk in case she ever had to go to the hospital" (234). After many failed efforts, she finally makes love and ironically succumbs to the patriarchal order. "I felt no pleasure, just some strange satisfaction that I had done what I was born to do" (316).

When Kate decides to live with Eugene, people from her village intervene and try to drag her back to the countryside. What is so frightening about these chapters is the collective power to treat women as possessions. Not one person cares about Kate as a person. The men, including her father, are protecting the patriarchal traditions and their reputations. They wanted to succeed even at the cost of Kate's misery, making her a commodity instead of a human being. Eugene defends himself, but the voice of rationality is not heard above the cultural and religious mores of men versus women.

Eugene is the outsider and cannot fathom the depth of Irish emotion in the face of challenges to traditions. He is too quick to dismiss the pervasive ideology that forced the men to battle for Kate's honor. Stunted by her perceptions of life, Kate does not realize the implications of the confrontation. "They've ruined, and ruined, and ruined me" (302), and ironically she speaks the truth. The society had ruined her though she will not be able to verbalize this association until the third novel.

Lacking realistic advice from anyone, Kate remains trapped in innocence and immaturity. She continues to believe in romantic-novel love and lacks the sophistication to see through the paternalistic manipulations of worldly Eugene. "Eugene guarded me like a child, taught me things, gave me books to read, and gave pleasure to my body at night" (323). The superficial and controlling lover dominates the relationship. In spite of her "living in sin," Kate remains rigidly attached to the past, especially the Catholic Church. "'I won't get married,' I said rashly,'unless I get married in the Catholic Church'" (329). Since Eugene is Protestant and already married, her threats ring hollow. The pragmatic and unromantic world of Eugene is too complex and puzzling for Kate. She does not have the necessary insight to survive and realize success in this alien landscape. Kate is even ignorant of the most basic biological processes. When Baba visits and explains that she is pregnant, Kate exclaims, "'But

you can't,'I said in a panic. 'You're not even living with anyone'" (347). Basic biology, such as unprotected sex equals possible pregnancy, eludes her. In an era when sex was a sinful secret, who could provide the forbidden knowledge -- her dead mother, the virginal nuns, the censored textbooks? The weight of patriarchal traditions conspired to keep country girls like Kate ignorant and submissive. Watching her try to negotiate her way through society causes poignancy, sadness and occasionally humor. Her analogies are nearly always couched in religious images, even when the references are inappropriate. When Baba writes to say she is not pregnant, Kate ironically remarks, "She was no longer pregnant. Her prayers had been heard" (351). Kate prayed for everything, even if it was for the termination of an illegitimate pregnancy.

Still seeing herself as the heroine in a romance novel, Kate gives Eugene an ultimatum, and he refuses to be threatened. The affair ends, and Baba wryly states, "My mother is bloody right...all men are pigs" (362). Few interactions between men and woman can possibly succeed when the girls have been indoctrinated into fear by their mothers. With no thought of her unhappiness, everyone in her village is pleased to hear that her sinful affair has ended. "My father was delighted. In a letter he praised me for being so loyal to my family, and to my religion" (367). As the second novel ends, Kate still hopes for a reconciliation. She and Baba exile themselves from

Ireland, desperately seeking escape. They have not yet learned that there can be no freedom from the past since it is carried in memories that accompany them everywhere.

In Girls in Their Married Bliss, Kate has her Catholic wedding. However, it is performed in the sacristy since she marries divorced Eugene and she is pregnant. The marriage is doomed when Kate has a brief relationship with another man (no sex), and Eugene retaliates. Still unrealistic, Kate dreamily believes that her lover will leave his wife. The bitter reality is much different. The novel does not descend into more maudlin observations from Kate, because O'Brien has the iconoclastic Baba narrate the events. Her caustic comments place Kate's plight in perspective. At the same time, Baba's failings are disclosed. Of Kate, she pronounces, "She was like that, she gave too quickly. She did not have her husband's instinct to preserve" (399). In any argument with Eugene, Kate was destined to lose. The blame for failure, whether it is was a marriage or a child, fell on the woman.

Baba explains to her husband Frank the source of Kate's problems, "It was the mercy of God her mother drowned or she'd still be going around tacked onto her mother's navel" (409). Baba does not realize that Kate will always be attached to that navel; the umbilical cord was never severed. However, Baba does speak the truth when she sees the vicious cycle of stifling motherhood being repeated. When Kate is agonizing about the fate of her son Cash, Baba comments, "Parents, I

thought, the whole ridiculous mess beginning all over again. Hers and mine and all the blame we heaped on them, and we no better ourselves" (421). Kate as the mother of an Irish son is pathetic, becoming the martyred Irish mother suffering for her sins and her failure to be the perfect mother.

The circularity of the three novels becomes more evident as Kate's plight grows more despairing. Baba foreshadows Kate's eventual demise when she offhandedly asserts, "Out drowning herself, I imagined" (431). Kate herself corroborates this idea when she contemplates suicide. "If only she had the decency to kill herself. Water was the gentlest way to suicide" (447).

Motherhood is all encompassing for Kate, so when Cash announces that he had "another mum" she is numbed by shock. Now she perceives her failure at its most primal level. A destroyed marriage is one thing but a usurpation of the Irish mother-son bond is crushing. The cold, damp, foggy weather mirrors Kate's condition, destruction of self. Ironically, she still refuses to acknowledge the bitter reality of the motherhood myth. When Baba tell Kate she is pregnant, Kate responds, "A woman needs children. I'd have more myself" (462). These words assume bleak poignancy as the novel reaches its climax in the final chapters.

O'Brien creates Kate as a pawn of a patriarchal system and culture. Religion and family conspire to keep her from the essential knowledge to succeed as a fully developed and

functional adult. Through two novels, Kate is portrayed as an utter innocent, mouthing home-grown superstitions, platitudes from her mother, and simplistic religious analogies to explain complex situations. At times this character borders on parody and charicature. Will Kate ever have any insight? Ever realize the truth about herself and those who shaped her beliefs? Ever confront her flawed perspectives? Finally, Kate has her epiphany, a moment of bitter revelation that propels her toward two symbolic and tragic deeds to end the cycle that Baba condemned.

While visiting a psychiatrist, Kate's rite of passage begins:

> Hill brought a sudden thought of her mother, and she felt the first flash of dislike she had ever experienced for that dead, overworked woman. Her mother's kindness and her mother's accidental drowning had always given her a mantle of perfection. Kate's love had been unchanged and everlasting, like the wax flowers under domes which would have been on her grave if she'd had one. Now suddenly she saw the woman in a different light. A self-appointed martyr. A blackmailer. Stitching the cord back on. Smothering her one child in loathsome, spongy soft, paper love. (477)

Kate's final sad thought echoes the melancholy truth of stunted development: "Childhood, when one was at the mercy of everything but did not know it" (479).

When Eugene flees the country with Cash, Kate is overwhelmed. The defeat of hope is even more devastating because the state cooperates in the separation of mother and son. When she desperately calls the passport office to inquire why she had not been consulted, "The clerk said that a

mother's signature was not necessary for such a thing" (503). The constructed mother has no ownership of her product or power to change the laws. Kate is also the victim of economic slavery since she does not have enough money to fight for her son. The ideals of love, sacrifice, virtues, caring are no match for the bitter realities of a controlling society that colonizes part of its population. "It boiled down to a question of money" (566), Kate resignedly asserts. A quietly powerful statement emphasizes the tragedies of countless women and mothers.

The conclusion comes swiftly and surprisingly. Deprived of her motherhood by the state, Kate has a hysterectomy, ultimately severing her ability to perpetuate Irish motherhood. The primal force to create and nurture new life is destroyed. The metaphor is striking, the physical mimicking the emotional. Kate sacrifices herself, mutilates her body in an attempt to obliterate the continuation of the myth. Women are symbolically sterile in this patriarchal state; now, Kate is physically sterile, too. Perhaps she is the idyllic Irish mother, after all, sacrificing herself to prevent her unborn children from the pains she experienced.

Almost as an afterthought, O'Brien includes an epilogue. There are no surprises. Baba, feisty and brutally honest, survives the course of life. Her husband had a stroke, but she is able to withstand the pressures and tensions of an unhappy existence without reveling in self pity. Her yearning for the

"good old days" is tempered by the reality of what is. Her cynical humor and keen observation of the truth indicate an understanding of the cosmic jokes that humans must endure. Of course, Kate the romantic, cannot possibly live and prosper. Created by her mother, molded by time, place and ideology, she dies like her mother by accidental drowning. Baba's words capture the truth. "It was death by accident, they had a coroner in at dawn. Death is death whether it's by accident or design" (524). The savage indictment of a society that destroys idealistic women like Kate again reverberates through Baba's long and engrossing monologue. One line says it all, "Father - the crux of her dilemma" (531). She has expressed the reality of women under patriarchy. So many demands were made to cooperate and fulfill the destiny of others; so much blame was meted out when the inevitable failures occur.

No one really knows how Kate drowns. She had been learning to swim and "apparently she had swum a few strokes and probably got carried away, and then went in alone and lost her bearings" (529). The symbolic meaning of this explanation is obvious -- Kate, alone and lost, is probably pulled down by the weight of all her guilt and failure. In spite of the official version, both Kate's son and Baba sense the truth: death is death by accident or design.

> I suppose it was the future she couldn't face . . . I don't blame her, I realize she was in the fucking wilderness. Born there. Hadn't the reigns to haul herself out. Should have gone to night school, learned a few things, such as 'Put thy trust in no man'" (531).

In the end it is Kate's son who will grasp for understanding and fail. Cash will not comprehend the world of women, the domain of his mother. Baba's final comments convey the powerlessness of generations to communicate, whether it be mother to daughter or mother to son. "I'm praying that her son won't interrogate me, because there are some things in this world you cannot ask, and oh, Agnus Dei, there are some things in this world you cannot answer" (531). The depth of pain will not be known, understood, or acknowledged.

A discussion of Irish motherhood would not be complete without mentioning the unique relationship of mothers and sons. Sons have been treasured children in many cultures, but in Ireland they assumed a particularly great importance. They were coddled, protected, and privileged while their sisters retained an inferior status. Of course, this dominance of the male child was in keeping with a patriarchal society. In Ireland Since the Rising, Timothy Coogan reinforces the idea that Irish sons were special. "Another factor in sustaining the male orientation of the external aspects of Irish life is the privileged position within the average home which mothers give to sons" (196). Sons were recognized as superior, and the mothers, products of the partriarchy, participated in the cultural/religious orientation.

However, the close relationship between Irish mothers and sons went beyond the obvious patriarchal belief about male superiority. In keeping with the nature of Irish patriarchy,

the mother-son bond developed through cultural and religious influences unique in Ireland. First, Irish men tended to marry later in life and were more apt to remain in the home until their marriage. Second, knowing the limited lives that their daughters faced, mothers instinctively sought success through their sons, a haven from their own constricted world. Third, sons were easier to raise. Because of the constraints and traditions of the Irish patriarchal culture, men had privileges that women would never attain. Rarely would a son disgrace the family or his mother. On the other hand, daughters represented the ever-constant threat of sin (particularly sexual) and the potential to destroy the mother's social standing in the rural community. Fourth, a son promised vicarious acceptance in the patriarchy, a continuation of the traditions that the mother had nurtured. A daughter could never hope to compete with this religious and social power inherent in sons. Daughters functioned in the home, did the domestic work, and were taught to defer to their fathers and brothers. Fifth, children often became a substitute for a failed marriage. Marital intimacy was not encouraged in the Irish culture, and mothers sought fulfillment in their relationships with sons. While physical intimacy was not possible, a spiritual reliance and closeness became a feeble substitute. Lacking a satisfying life, the mothers looked to their sons for completion. In O'Brien's world, they were often disappointed.

Culturally, sons were better, and religiously they also excelled. Of course, the extremely close relationship of priests and their Irish mothers is well known. In a country obssessed by religion, the highest honor that any Irish mother could hope to achieve was to have one of her sons become a priest. Heaven was assuredly guaranteed, and much praise and respect on Earth was also a reward. A priest was God's representative and had significant powers in the community. Daughters could become nuns, also a positive vocation, but they did not possess the exalted position of a priest. This relationship of sons and mothers to the Catholic Church was reinforced in the images of Mary and Jesus. Since Mary was revered as the ideal of Irish motherhood, it was only natural that the comparisons included references to her son. Mary gave birth to Jesus but did not dominate. Instead, she was passive and obedient, often pictured as kneeling in deference to her son. "This image of Mary continues the origin of the stereotype of the traditional Irish mother as a woman overdevoted to her sons, protecting them and serving them, rearing them to believe they are more important than she is" (Beal 52).

With all this adulation and preference, sons should naturally reciprocate with love and affection for their mothers. Unfortunately, all too often, this reciprocity was denied. The prevailing result of this burdensome attention was resentment or outright rejection. At the very least, the sons

matured and abandoned their mothers, who could not cope with this loss. This betrayal of maternal love is one of the themes that Edna O'Brien illuminates in her fiction.

O'Brien is, in reality, an Irish mother. She has two sons, Carlos and Sasha, and makes no excuses for her overwhelming motherly affection. They are the men in her life ever since she divorced their father when the boys were young. O'Brien never remarried, preferring to devote herself to fiction and her sons. They are integral to her life and, unlike the fictional sons of her stories, have not rejected her. Yet there is always a bittersweet quality to mother-son relationships. While daughters naturally are envisioned as keepers of the home and family, as women who can remain within the family unit indefinitely, when sons leave and marry, they often fail to maintain an intimate bond with their mothers. This strong desire for a son is mirrored in the novel Johnny I Hardly Knew You. O'Brien's narrator, the mother, speculates about sleeping with her son. "Oh to be loved by him. Incest raising its little tonsured head. It must be the nearest thing to birth, to couple with one's own, to reunite" (17). This physical incest is reflected in the symbolic incest of an Irish mother and son, the desire for total possession, the subordination of self to the male, the inescapable sorrow as the dependency alters and very often severs.

Men are silent creatures in O'Brien's fiction.(This characteristic will be discussed in a later chapter.) Her

narrators are women, and all the male characters are presented through them. Husband and fathers are virtually absent from the narratives, but O'Brien does chronicle the lives of sons in more detail than other Irish males. However, no sons reveal life with their Irish mothers. Instead, mothers and other women expose in vivid detail the sadness a mother experiences for devotion to the male hierarchy. They empower their sons with patriarchal beliefs, only to be left wanting and alone. O'Brien's mothers are truly solitary. They do not possess loving husbands or companions to fill the emptiness of life. As wives, they lack effective communication with their husbands, and when the sons reject them, the sting of an unfulfilled life is sharp. Investing so much of themselves in the relationship, the unhappiness can be devastating. Fragmented already by the demands of society, the self is further mutilated in the process.

"The glorification of sacrificial motherhood is still very strong in Ireland" (Beal 52). This assessment of mother as martyr is strikingly dissected in "The Creature," a short story in A Scandalous Woman and Other Stories. In the hands of a less talented writer, this tale would border on the maudlin, on melodrama. However, O'Brien's understated recounting of a sacrificial mother and her ungrateful son seethes with the power of truth. Deceived by the prevailing culture, the mother behaves as a loving and generous parent only to feel the sting of an ungrateful child. However, the son also suffers, a

saddened participant in the limited, rural culture, who also has an unhappy marital bond. The title identifies the mother as a creature, some distorted mythic being created by society. She does not even have a name. Her identity was destroyed long age, drowned by her weight of false ideals of mothering. The story is told by an observer, one who wants desperately to help another woman. Ironically, the consequences of her personal usurpation of the inevitable order indicts the entire system. No one can save the participants in this tragic tale.

The narrator describes the Creature: "Life had treated her rottenly, yet she never complained but always had a ready smile" (85), the Irish mother personified, fatalistically accepting unhappiness. The depressing details accumulate. She is a widow; one child lives in Canada, and the son lives four miles away but has not communicated with his mother for seventeen years. The pressures on an Irish mother as protector of every generation are sadly illuminated. She could not tell her own mother that her husband had died "since her mother had lost a son about the same time, also in combat" (86). The details of her frugal life, raising children in virtual poverty, only contribute to the pathos that follows. Her son is the beacon of hope. She is so proud when he serves Mass, and she sacrifices to send him to boarding school. He leaves the village but returns to marry and become a farmer. "Imagine her joy" (88), but her joy soon turns to sorrow.

The plot is predictable as the daughter-in-law and son

pressure the Creature into signing the farm over to them. What else could happen? Murmurings of King Lear are heard as the son proves faithless to his mother and forces her to leave, a sad story of unfulfilled hopes. One of O'Brien's major themes is the inability to communicate with those who share a primal relationship. O'Brien illustrated this unfortunate truism when her daughters and mothers attempted a reconciliation. It is also true for her sons and mothers. Once the bond of affection and trust is breached, it can never be mended. The narrator naively arranges a reconciliation between the Creature and her son which proves disastrous. The Creature, offering a facade of tranquility, pretends that nothing has happened between them and relies on her "motherly" ways to win him back. The son is a sad creature himself. "He had newspapers in the soles of his shoes to keep out the damp, and she took off those damp shoes and tried to polish them" (92-3). In watching this pathetic scene of two lost people, the narrator finally comprehends why the past is lost forever. "I could see how it all had been, with her jumping up and down trying to please him but in fact just making him edgy" (93). The excesses of motherhood smother the object of love.

One final comment pierces the narrative. The speaker realizes that she was at fault, that she was a "meddler." Now, the Creature has no hope, no dreams of a future, tearful reunion with her son. "Whereas for twenty years she had lived on that last high tightrope of hope, it had been taken away

from her, leaving her without anyone, without anything . . ." (93). The emptiness is final. A simple story filled with too much sorrow and yet very realistic. The disintegration of the Creature's relationship actually unites the two women. The narrator realizes that she is not the only one who has experienced loss: "All at once I remembered the little hawthorne tree, the bare ploughed field, his heart as black and unawakened as the man I had come away to forget, and there was released in me, too, a gigantic and useless sorrow" (93).

Tragic lives exist everywhere. The true tragedy in the story is the fact that the Creature demanded so little of life: a home, a family, the love of a son. All were denied her. The daughter escaped, and the son rejected her. The ultimate irony is that she may inadvertently have caused her own destruction. By giving too much, she overwhelmed all around her. She was caught in the impasse between ideology and reality. Believing what she had been taught about sacrifice, she wanted to please everyone and ended pleasing no one, not even herself. O'Brien has crafted a tale that envelopes the complexity of intimate, familial relationships. The simplicity of the mother's actions overturned a cauldron of emotions that could not have been foreseen.

In the story "In the House of Darkness" in Mrs. Reinhardt and Other Stories, another mother emerges. Gone is the quiet, rural village of pastoral Ireland. Instead, this mother is an urban dweller saying goodbye to her son at college. What could

be more mundane? Here is a ritual of development that many parents experience. However, this mother is a creation of O'Brien and does not respond in an ordinary manner. There is a sadness in this mother that predominates. Instead of viewing her son's growth as cause for joy and a time of potential, the mother envisions the widening gap that will develop between them. Her focus is warped. Irish mothers cannot leave the past, cannot be objective. By immersing themselves in their children's lives, they lose their perspective. Once again, the heightened feelings are the result of loneliness, the prospect of losing the person who consumed so much of life. These women do not progress to careers or to lovers or to husbands. They experience the ultimate fear of abandonment, the disintegration of a major component of their lives, and nothing will fill the void. They are aimless and, in this story, they realize the ramifications of such a change.

The narrator announces the realization of life:

> . . . she was facing the predicament she had read about in novels - that of a divorced woman, bereft of her children, having to grow old without their beloved props, having in some indescribable way to take the first steps into loneliness as if she were a toddler again. (100)

Of course, the irony is that toddlers crawl their way to freedom and happiness while she will be reintroduced to aimlessness and despair. The references to "beloved props" is telling. The children, especially sons, provide the mothers with a purpose, a chance to leave a successful legacy on earth, a reason for being.

The description of Cambridge is warming, and most parents would feel pleasure in the accomplishments of their child. However, O'Brien is more realistic. This is a mother, alone. She feels joy for her son, but the melancholy of time passing is apparent. The juxtaposition of lovely descriptions of Cambridge "admiring the courtyard, the stone archways, and the beautiful formidable entrance" (104), and her reactions are startling. "At the hotel she bade Iain good night and knew that the hour had come when they were parting more or less forever" (104). "The hour had come," the resonance of O'Brien's religious background as she alludes to the words that Jesus uttered as He prepared for His Passion and crucifixion. The echoes are obvious - - the mother sacrificing her son to the patriarchal halls of Cambridge, and her son will not look back.

She is restless and cannot sleep. Returning to her son's college, she sees him, "Just before the figure came level with her she realized that it was Iain and that obviously he was going in search of adventure"(105). She tries to be nonchalant and almost seductive: "Haven't I met you somewhere?" (105) She recognizes that he has already made the break and is simply being cordial. The depth of her wanting is wrenching as he tells her that they would have maid service: "How I wanted to be that maid" (105). The irony is poignant. The Irish-mother vocation is to serve gladly even in the most servile roles. She is a disenfranchised mother with no place to go.

The narrator parallels the two lives, one in twilight and the other in sunrise. While the mother desperately seeks sleep, the son embarks on the adventures of life. He has climbed to the roof and "debating whether to pee on it or not, and make a statement that might result on their being rusticated" (106). As the mother's life is receding, the son's is just beginning. His mother remembers him; he has forgotten her.

The mother waits for morning. "Then she sank into the gaping armchair and waited silently for morning" (107). Her son is gone; she cannot sleep. The realistic conclusion is complete. What will happen to her? Irrevocably, she has lost a son and must find a different life. O'Brien concludes with an indeterminate ending. The son is forging forward; the mother is left behind. What she will do after her role in life is destroyed is never determined. The subtext is that there is no life after children leave. Mothers are condemned to a half life of remembrances and regrets.

One story deals with a rural mother, trapped in the traditions of her limited society; another portrays the agony of a son who must mature; the third concerns a mature mother who grapples with a deteriorating relationship as others intervene between mother and son. In "Storm," a story in Lantern Slides, a mature and worldly mother must confront the realities of a bond with a mature son. The title is both literal and symbolic. A storm does threaten to take her son's

life, but the storm within the two of them is much more devastating.

A young girl of twenty has come between the son and mother.

> She is irked that a girl of twenty can be so self-assured, irked at the languid painstaking way that Penny applies her suntan oil, making sure that it covers each inch of her body, then rolling onto her stomach imploring Mark to cover her back completely. (89)

These words disguise the total alienation of a mother and son. Simply stated, the mother is jealous: her son has found satisfaction and pleasure with another woman. The paradox of Irish motherhood is that she can never fully possess her son, the object of her greatest affection. Incest cannot be the conclusion of the relationship. Instead, another is destined to fulfill the son's emotional life while the mother can only hope to have a secondary role.

"A mist had descended, a mist so thick and so opaque that she cannot see the pillars and has to move like a sleepwalker to make her way to the balustrade" (90). What can she do? She is in territory that is alien and forbidding. Her son's loyalties are clearly divided, guilt about his mother conflicting with desire for Penny. Clearly, O'Brien has set the stage for a mother/son confrontation. "His rage is savage and she realizes that a boy who had been mild and gentle all his life is cursing her, vehemently" (93). She finally understands: "He had passed sentence on her forever" (93).

This middle-aged mother trying to maintain a viable bond

with her adult son must withstand the chaos of realization. "The fine thread sustaining the kite suggests to her that thin thread between mother and child and it is as if the full meaning of motherhood has been revealed to her at last" (95). What is the full meaning of motherhood? It is the knowledge that one human being cannot totally fulfill the needs of another. It is the knowledge that a mother must be confined to the memories of childhood as the child ventures into the future. Such is the reality of life. However, the Irish mother, ingrained to maintain the patriarchal values of Church and State, cannot often voluntarily sever the cord that binds child and mother. The severing inevitably mutilates the mother.

The tension is palpable in the story until the potential tragedy occurs. The son and Penny were sailing when a sudden storm arose. Suddenly, the petty problems of control seem useless as the threat of annihilation looms on the stormy seas. In a realistic sequence, O'Brien describes the endless wait of a survivor, the regret for what was said, what should have been said, what passes through a mother's mind as she waits for deadly news. The mother agonizes, praying, searching for something that will guarantee her son's safety: ". . . her anguish will lessen once she gets inside, once she kneels down and prostrates herself before her maker" (97). God is never far away in an O'Brien story. The text reinforces the torture of anticipation, the slow passage of time as Ellen (the

mother) hovers between hope and despair. Finally, the couple returns. Reader and character breath a sigh of relief as the car pulls into the driveway. It has been a long wait. Ellen and her son strive to bond but do not; she halfheartedly insists on going home and he requests that she stay. "The look that he gives her is full of both pity and dread" (103).

He makes the decision that their relationship should stay superficial and safe. "They had each looked into the abyss and drawn back, frightened of the primitive forces that lurk there" (103). In the end, mother and son have forfeited the intimacy of familial connection on the altar of maturation and progress. The mother will concede and maintain a superficial connection rather than jeopardize the veneer of understanding that substitutes for real communication.

Ultimately, Irish mothers suffer for their children, both female and male, trapped in the toils of patriarchal Church and State.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE ROLE OF PRIESTS AND NUNS IN THE IRISH PATRIARCHY

> We went to attend Mass in the Augustinian Church and there one sometimes caught sight of the 'heavenly priest' lost to us in his beautiful vestments and his mysterious Latin (O'Brien, Mother Ireland 66)

The power of the priesthood in Ireland is well known. After the famine of 1846-47, the Catholic Church assumed control of educating the young and indoctrinating them in the tenets of religion. The historical background for this appropriation of power has already been discussed in Chapter Two. Economic catastrophe coupled with inferior treatment of the native Irish people created a claustrophobic atmosphere that promised to be alleviated through the intercession of the Catholic Church. The Church did succeed in its mission of educating the poor children of Ireland. However, an unfortunate paradox occurred as a result of this social transformation. The very structure of the Catholic Church -- patriarchal, hierarchical and authoritarian -- provided the discipline to create and sustain the educational system. But these same traits guaranteed a parochial education in the literal sense, that is, conservative, limited, and constrained by the accepted doctrines of the Church. In other words, the model of education as a source of enlightenment and nurturing of innovative ideas did not exist in Irish Catholic schools. Rather, through administration, the Church solidified its

religious ideals and values within the Irish society. Of course, the Catholic Church could not succeed in its vision without the cooperation and trust of the Irish people, and this relationship was forged and maintained through the efforts of a crucial archetype of Irish society, the parish priest. From the nineteenth century, the "Diocesan priest had been the moral policeman of Ireland" (Inglis 42). The political, social and economic structure of Ireland -- rural, decentralized and isolated -- fostered reliance on local leaders. Since the Irish population was neither aggressive nor well educated, they sought out those whom they could trust. Priests, perceived as educated and earthly representatives of Christ, were natural leaders and became very powerful. "The place of the priest in Irish life is already clear. He continues to be the man of greatest influence in the lives of the people. That influence because of the great faith of the people carries a commanding force" (Toner 31). That influence, as recorded in O'Brien's fiction, extended not only to questions of morals and faith but also to daily social and political issues.

The cleric's power cannot be understated. The parish priest in Ireland was the final arbiter of the village, and his decisions had a lasting effect on those in the parish. In general, adherence to the moral code of the Catholic Church was the standard for acceptance in the community. Those who failed to conform were ostracized both socially and

spiritually. Presiding over the life cycles of his parishioners, the rural priest performed rituals that were rich in mystery and imagery -- the sacrifice of the Mass, baptisms, marriages, last rites, and death. He was God's personal intercessor, who could guarantee eternal happiness or damnation. As has been stated previously, this appropriation of the afterlife assured obedience among the faithful. Of course, the idealized portrait of a saintly and unworldly priest motivated solely by mystical forces was a false stereotype. Priests were human, had sinful yearnings, and occasionally surrendered to their darker natures. The problem with the public persona versus private reality was the veil of secrecy that surrounded the more human characteristics of the clergy. As a result, people were ill-prepared to recognize dishonest priests or expose their flaws. The priests' piety was not questioned and, if some error did penetrate the religious aura, the assumption was that the priest did not cause the problem. Such are the revelations of the priesthood that O'Brien incorporates in her fiction. She deals with the discrepancy between the created image of mysterious priesthood and the reality of fallible manhood. This interplay becomes more poignant because her portraits of the clergy are filtered through her female characters, who have been raised in the patriarchal Catholic tradition and are not capable of questioning the system without feelings of insecurity and guilt.

A male priest, representing a male God, was a powerful force for women who respected and feared him simultaneously. After all, women were dependent on the clergy for education and salvation. Since the priest controlled education, women were subjected to the male perception of womanhood. "It was the priest and the Church who helped transform rough, uncouth girls into delicate colleens who must be protected from sexual evil within" (Inglis 209). Reflecting the Catholic tradition of submission and purity (derived from Mary, the Virgin Mother), women were taught to honor their fathers, their husbands, and their God. The penalty for resistance to these formulas was not only exile from the community but also the denial of salvation. "There was a missionary who came and spoke . . . about the immortal soul, and on those evenings, the picture of hell, the great chambers of hell with its tongues of blooded flame and its gleeful devils, stood out . . . " (O'Brien, Mother Ireland 59). Where women's behavior was concerned, sex could not be ignored. When O'Brien creates priests in her fiction, they symbolize the disparity between the power of the Catholic Church (and society) and the helplessness of young women who attempt to live fulfilling lives. The contest is uneven, and the defeat of the weaker is inevitable.

In creating her Irish clergy, O'Brien has not developed a fully realized priestly character. In fact, all of her male characters tend to be one-dimensional, remnants of her

sheltered childhood. Simply, she did not have enough experience interacting with priest or men to develop complex male individuals. Priests continue to have a distant focus, hovering around the main plot without being protagonists or antagonists. Many times they act as foils for the narrators, persisting in the traditional cliches, while the main character succumbs to the weight of patriarchal attitudes. At these times, the power of O'Brien's understated fiction is especially startling.

The role of the priest in rural villages reverberates with life in several O'Brien works, including "Oft in the Stilly Night" and "The Widow" from Lantern Slides; "The Bachelor" from Returning; The Country Girl Trilogy, and A Pagan Place.

In "Oft in the Stilly Night," O'Brien portrays the power of a priest to influence those around him, sometimes for the worse. Father Bonaventure is a young priest, trying to inspire the love of God in reluctant villagers. He comes to conduct a mission, a series of sermons designed to jar people out of complacency and into the acceptance of goodness and redemption. However, these sermons rely more on fear than charity for compliance, recalling crucifixion and hell fire. In an understated and ironic vocabulary, O'Brien describes the priest's demeanor after an especially intense homily: "He resembled some great performer who feared that he had lost his touch with the audience" (Lantern Slides 16). Religion as

drama; priest as dramatic actor, worrying more about his performance than the souls he is attempting to save. These sermons trigger a violent reaction in Ita, who already has an attraction for the young priest. O'Brien is very realistic in portraying the physical appeal that often occurs between priest and female parishioners -- forbidden feelings that women had to accept as their weakness. Ita is so obsessed with the priest and the Church, in general, that her only escape is insanity. Sexual fervor warped by a limited society leads to uncontrollable frenzy and hospitalization. Father Bonaventure cannot confront, and does not want to confront, the source of Ita's hysteria. The asylum is the answer, and neither he nor the Church will accept blame for their negative influence on a sheltered village woman who took her love of Christianity to the extreme. As will be discussed in the chapter on sexuality, often rural women in their ignorance and innocence could not fathom the tangled web of emotion that sexual longings, especially for a priest, engendered. Ita becomes another victim of the frenzied images perpetrated by overzealous clergy.

The daily role of the priest is also revealed in several O'Brien short stories. The popular belief that priests influence the community is not always accurate. In each narrative the impotence of the priest to alter the villagers' attitudes is highlighted. In O'Brien's fiction the clergy, although readily available to preach from the pulpit, cannot

persuade their parishioners to change their minds once they have settled on a course of action. Therefore, another paradox results. On the one hand, the priest is admired and consulted on many issues; on the other, the villagers use him to confirm their thoughts rather than change them -- so potent and yet so impotent! "The Widow" provides a striking example of this duality. In this short story, the townspeople come to resent the happiness of Bridget, a widow, and the creamery manager. "Her happiness was too much for people to take" (O'Brien, Lantern Slides 43). Then the women decide to consult the parish priest, "But when they arrived the parish priest was in such a grump about the contributions towards a new altar that he told them to pull their socks up and try to raise money by selling cakes and jellies and things at a bazaar" (43). The author comments, "He suspected why they had come . . ." (43), but in this case he did nothing to try to assuage the women's prejudices. O'Brien suggests that the priest's main concern is money. In the conclusion, Bridget is killed in an accident; the townspeople are unrepentant and the priest has disappeared from the narrative. This story is indeed tragic with no solace from the merciful representative of God.

In "The Bachelor," a story in Returning, the priest is again inept in advising others. Jack thought he was engaged to a young girl of the village. However, she never knew of his adoration and innocently rejected him. When the parish priest attempts to counsel Jack, he is summarily rebuffed. "Well, now

Jack, there's none of us getting younger, and time is passing, and you are keeping company with a very nice lady and isn't it time that you thought of settling down," to which Jack replies, "Marriage, Father," said Jack, "is out of the question. I was betrothed for a long number of years to a certain lady in this parish, who jilted me. It has embittered my ideals about the opposite sex . . ." (O'Brien, Returning 80). The priest leaves, and Jack is not consoled.

It is only in matters of sexuality that the priest and townspeople consistently agree. Then the priest becomes a useful ally in attempting to retrieve some honor from a dishonorable situation. However, the priest's bias is readily apparent, and charity is abandoned in the pursuit of obedience to Catholic doctrine. The Lonely Girls, book two of The Country Girl Trilogy, describes an episode that is vivid in its condemnation of priestly consolation. Caithleen has been kidnapped and returned to her village. She wants desperately to escape, to be reunited with her lover, Eugene. Of course, the parish priest condones the imprisonment because young girls cannot be trusted when sexuality is involved. The patriarchal overtones are stark and repulsive. Unjust behavior, no matter how ethically incorrect, is sanctioned in the name of morality. When the village priest visits Caithleen, O'Brien creates an episode that details the complex interaction between a young, insecure girl and the powerful representative of God. The subtlety also makes this scene

memorable. Father Hagerty recites the Catholic doctrine by rote and the cliches reverberate throughout the text. The repetition of meaningless rhetoric would almost be a parody except for the seriousness of Caithleen's narrative voice. She tries to prevail and does admirably, considering her more experienced, formidable foe. She even attempts an argument supporting inherent goodness against the legalistic grounds for censure but is sharply rebuked by the conservative voice of the patriarchy. This duel of the old and young, the patriarchal mandate and the rebellious questioning, is pivotal in the novel. Caithleen cries, but does not retreat.

As narrator, Caithleen describes an incident when Father Hagerty was dishonest (while raising funds for the chapel). Therefore, the next line is ironic, one sinner preaching to another. First cliche: "You are walking the path of moral damnation" (269). The priest condemns Eugene for being a divorced man. Caithleen shyly protests, "He seems to be a good man. He doesn't drink or anything" (269). The priest promptly strikes the patriarchal stance: "Ah, you poor child," relegating Caithleen to an inferior position by patronizing her. The priest has no pity for a woman in love, no understanding of another human, but simply condescension, simplistic attitudes, and a dismissal of Caithleen as an ignorant female. Second cliche: " 'Think of your eternal soul,' he said" and Caithleen comments in the narrative "as if he were giving a sermon from the altar." The threat of eternal

damnation is always forceful, and Caithleen cannot dismiss it. She admits, "That worried me . . . " (269). The priest continues with pulpit platitudes, for example, "God is testing your love" and "You're turning your back on God." (270). To solidify the reality of his words, he hands her a "leather bound volume with gilt edging - The Imitation of Christ" (271). The powerful emotions that Caithleen is attempting to control are conveyed in an understated sentence, "I took it [the book] and saw a tear of mine drop onto the brown leather cover" (271). She is struggling in her own quiet way.

Finally, in the climax of this episode, Father Hagerty seeks her promise not to see Eugene again. Defying a priest's direct request is tremendously difficult, but she manages to prevail. "She'll think about it" (271) is her non-committal answer. The power of love for Eugene and trust in her own instincts enable Caithleen to resist the pressures of traditional Catholicism. This small victory does not mean that she will be free from the scars of her upbringing. Guilt and fear do not dissipate after only one successful encounter.

The double standard for men and women is reinforced when Caithleen complains that her father is a drunkard and an abuser. "It's as big a sin for my father to be like that [abusive] as for a man to have two wives" (271). The statement reflects Caithleen's gradual awareness of right and wrong, a moral system based on actions rather than abstractions. However, the priest immediately reasserts the conservative

standards. Sexuality [female] is a mortal sin; drunkenness [male] is a weakness. "I'm surprised at you," he said, "to speak of your good father like that. Every man takes a drink. It's the climate" (271). In this scene the plight of the Irish woman is emphasized. There is nowhere to turn for consolation and understanding in a closed Catholic world. Caithleen manages to repel the intense pressure of the clergy and make her escape, for the time being. Others are not so fortunate.

In A Pagan Place two sisters have different experiences with priests, both devastating to them and their families. Emma, the narrator's sister, becomes pregnant and is forced to live in the city while waiting for the birth of the baby. When her mother and the narrator visit, Emma says that the visits from the priest were her one and only solace. So far, the priest is kind and charitable. However, all too soon, he rejects her when she does not exhibit the guilt and remorse traditionally expected from an unwed, pregnant girl. When Emma disappears, her mother visits Father Scanlon and is subjected to his invective about her "fallen" daughter.

> He said Emma had gone the wrong way, was well on the road to perdition. A libertine he called her. He said the terrible thing was that she had vocabulary and expression to ornament her various ideas and in that way she might exert power over others. (149)

What an indictment! Emma was intelligent and might corrupt others. As long as she remained humble and passive, the priest was willing to guide her. Once she challenged his authority and asserted her intellect. "He said she used the red herring

of all heathens, the one about free will" (149), he rejected and condemned her. It is no surprise that woman did not participate in conversations with the clergy. They could not possibly hope to be treated either as equals or as people engaged in an intellectual dialogue.

The most scathing portrait of a priest is presented in A Pagan Place. The narrator is sexually abused by a young, handsome priest who takes advantage of his power to lure her into a compromising situation. O'Brien manages a complex range of emotions in this candid, sexually charged episode. First, the depiction of a priest as a predator is both surprising and shocking. O'Brien elicits anger from the reader as the innocent girl is seduced. However, the characters defy stereotyping. Evidently, the young priest suffers immensely from his weakness. As he berates himself while masturbating and finally climaxes, the narrator states, "There was a ridiculously short span between the first cry that was pleasure and the last that was shame" (178). The narrator, too, is curious about sexuality, confessing ambivalent feelings of fear and anticipation. She tests the first intimations of sexual pleasure but is unwilling to submit to intercourse. However, the utterly bizarre and revealing element of this episode is the relationship of priest to female. Throughout the text, the narrator expresses her fear of men accosting her and forcing themselves on her. Yet when the seducer is a priest, she confesses, "You were not afraid.

It was an honour. You thought of him in his gold vestments and him in his cassock . . ." (177). The mortal sin of sex and the risk of eternal damnation pales when compared with acceptance by and intimacy with a priest. O'Brien does not soften the real issues of power and punishment. The narrator is beaten by her father, and her relationship with her mother is forever destroyed when her mother does not defend her. "They were collaborators" (181). The priest left the parish with his parents, but the victim remains to receive the punishment. Nevertheless, such is the power of imagery and tradition that she does not blame him but fantasizes about the outcome of the encounter. "You pictured them going to his house, battering on the door, his being de-frocked, his being banished to a monastery for all time, his Holy Orders taken away." "You begged your guardian angel to tip off his guardian angel" (182). The narrator recognizes the cruelty of her parents and their destruction of her love and trust, but she maintains her awe and respect for the priest even in the face of corruption and abuse. She is willing to forgive him as she will not forgive her parents. The tradition continues. Women often suffer for the temptations of men, and the most trusted people cooperate in the condemnation and punishment of the innocent.

While priests are shadowy creatures in O'Brien's stories, the image of nuns is clearer. However, in spite of their interaction with other characters, they remain apart, enigmas in the Catholic patriarchal hierarchy. Always mysterious, nuns

imprint themselves and their teachings on the minds of their students, and their influence remains throughout life. They were such powerful icons and yet so powerless. This seeming contradiction reflects the ambiguous role of women in the Church. On the one hand, women were given the opportunity to participate in the religious life of Catholicism. The convent offered them a chance for another life; they were revered, respected, and feared. Nominally, they had more power than their secular counterparts. Yet, the irony is that these women were instrumental in continuing the Irish patriarchy. Both nuns and mothers, products of their culture, encouraged and demanded compliance from the younger generation. "Nuns disciplined, trained, and educated almost every Irish girl who progressed beyond primary school. They refined and polished these girls into paragons of modern Irish virtue" (Inglis 46), but modern Irish virtue according to the Catholic perception of womanhood.

> . . . many dedicated nuns taught girls obedience, docility and resignation to the role assigned them by a male providence, until the more gullible came to believe the role was a law of the universal nature and not simply the product of a peculiar and transient set of local circumstances. (Lee 41)

Irish girls were given educational opportunities, but independent thought was discouraged, and an anti-intellectualism prevailed. Of her convent days, O'Brien remembered the nuns' rejection of literature and art, chiefly for their sexual innuendo. "Then we were warned about literature, told how writers were arch hands at depicting

immodesty, in flaming imagery, relating the most obscene details . . ." (Mother Ireland 69). (One has to wonder how the nuns had such intimate knowledge of these supposedly lurid novels.) As for art, "The categoric answer was that the modern statuary of the nude or scarcely veiled photographs were all highly dangerous and that protracted gazing at such things without any just reason was usually a grievous sin" (Mother Ireland 69-70). The result of this negative reinforcement ranged from compliance with the society (carrying on the traditional roles of wife and mother) to guilt and exile for those who rebelled. The professions available to women after their convent education conformed to the patriarchal ideal. Of career opportunities for Irish women, Jenny Beal reports, "The highest calling was to be a nun, motherhood was the next best thing and the notion of being an independent working woman was barely entertained" (130). Whatever path the Irish girl chose, her convent experience remained, welded into her memory and often recalled at inappropriate moments as reminders of her lifelong connection to the Irish traditions. "The many shades of guilt that Edna O'Brien so dramatically explores in her novels can of course easily be traced to the strict religious environment of her Irish upbringing" (Popot 277). In truth, "Nuns were the silent, solid wall behind modern Catholicism" (Inglis 46).

And what of the nuns' own experiences? As willing participants in the Catholic hierarchy and having been raised

in the Irish tradition, they embodied the ideals of Christian womanhood and helped perpetuate the image of a submissive female. Nuns took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience -- bound by God to be virginal and compliant. What better model for curious, young, and potentially rebellious girls? However, "The desexualization of women in general had its counterpart in the depersonalization of nuns in the Irish imagination. Nuns were de-humanized in public images to a far greater extent than priests" (Lee 41). Their chastity was virginity to an extreme. In choosing the spiritual life of the Church, they had to deny their femininity, their womanhood. This distinct separation, spiritual and wordly, isolated them from the human community and stunted their emotional selves. "The life of individual nuns was closely regimented. Friendships were discouraged. Uniformity was the norm, and the expression of individuality through dress, opinions or actions was frowned upon" (Beal 175). In short, these religious women for all of their mystique and glorification in a patriarchal society were forced to endure unnecessary sacrifices and experienced the same loss and loneliness as O'Brien's secular heroines. The fact that many could not verbalize their plight made these characters even more poignant.

Of course, the complexity of any society requires assessing many factors. In a rigid and religious atmosphere such as Ireland's where power remained in the political and religious institutions, entering the sisterhood presented an

attractive alternative to the monotonous life of an Irish wife and mother.

> Certainly there is evidence that within a patriarchal society the convent offered opportunities to women not otherwise available to them within the social structure. But in a society that viewed female sexuality as the root of all evil, women could gain power to the extent to which they denied their own bodies. (Lerner, The Serpent and the Goddess 174)

However, in spite of the excessive denial and cooperation in a restrictive philosophy, women succumb to the vivid imagery surrounding convent life and entered in increasing numbers. "There was one nun to about every 7,000 Catholics in 1841, compared with one to about 400 a century later" (MacCurtain, Women in Irish History 39). They lived in their own secret world that outsiders could not penetrate (convents), sheltered from ordinary worries, such as drunken husbands, poverty, and rebellious children. They were perceived to have a private covenant with God and, of course, were guaranteed entrance into Paradise. But a strange fascination with their attire captured the imagination of students and the general populace. Curiosity mixed with a sense of the forbidden made speculations about the person hidden beneath the habit tempting and slightly sinful. Edna O'Brien expresses this in Mother Ireland: "To see a nun's eyebrow was as wicked and as bewitching as Keats felt when he saw the ungloved hand of the woman he loved . . ." (66). Ironically, the black habit, designed to hide a nun's femininity, only enhanced the mystery of her body. In Girls in Their Married Bliss, O'Brien

describes the vivid vision of a nun.

> Nuns, with their serene faces, and their very white hands lost in big black sleeves. A smell of linen and starch, the black smoking wick of a candle that a nun had quenched with her fingers, the suffocating sweetness of a certain kind of lily. (455)

This fictional representation mirrors the real world of the convent that O'Brien attended. In Mother Ireland, she remembers how the thought of a vocation lured her into a temporary desire to be a nun. The images were compelling.

> The thought of a vocation danced before me; like a banner, the word waved and with it the vision of a young postulant with a see through veil, one foot in the world and the other sinking deeper and deeper into the mists of spirituality, toward the "never to be forgotten day" when one would take final vows and be cut off from the world outside, from family, from pleasure, from men, from earthly love, from buses and shops and cafeterias, from life. (68)

The religious life seemed, from the outside, a heavenly dream.

In A Pagan Place the powerful influence of nuns is portrayed. The narrator had been severely punished for being the victim of sexual abuse. Ironically, though she rejects her parents, including the beloved mother, she yields to the vocabulary of vocation. In spite of a negative experience with the clergy, the lure of the Church remains. O'Brien's skill as a writer punctuates this episode. Subtle commentaries on the life of an Irish girl are coupled with humor and pathos.

The author introduces two stereotypical nuns, the older more comical and overzealous one, and a shy, younger sister representing the magnetism of sisterhood. The older nun

attempts to convince her captured audience to become "followers of Jesus." She employs seductive descriptions of exotic places -"China, Burma . . . the pagan Orient" and mystical visualizations such as "That world of eternal flames" and "the Devil" (187). During this frenzied sermon, the narrator guilelessly reports, "Those in the front row got sprayed with her spittle. The excess saliva hung in bubbles around the corners of her lips" (187). What better way to convey the absolute dedication of this nun to her recruitment efforts then to have her literally foaming at the mouth. However, while she is spitting out the traditional cliches, O'Brien introduces the young, submissive sister -- the captivating vocation incarnate. "The younger nun kept her head lowered and had her hands submerged in big black sleeves" (190). As Sister Baptista continues her diatribe, O'Brien elucidates the argument for women's subservience in the Church. The nun attempts to answer the gender-inequality issue and ends up weakening her own argument.

> She said in His time only male disciples were allowed to follow Him but that too had changed and women could take up the cudgel on his behalf. 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. (192)

Her own words damn the premise. To be a bride of Christ assumes submissiveness, and to speak of constancy in a spiritual relationship is bitterly humorous. Sister Baptista will stop at no flawed argument to lure the innocents. In case

the religious argument is not successful, she adds the more materialistic coda. "She explained that if girls went they were educated for free with a view to becoming novices" (192). The narrator cannot resist -- freedom from home, a chance for an education -- and all she would have to do is sacrifice herself on the altar of ideology. Forgotten in the narrator's enthusiasm is the fact that a representative of the Church destroyed her life. Religion is powerful and more so when the advocates are zealous and the audience young and eager.

Immediately, there is a change in peoples' attitudes toward the narrator. The simple idea that someone is sacrificing herself to the convent engenders respect. "It was as if you had already entered, so shy and respectful were they" (193). Of course, the narrator's motive for accepting this "vocation" is less than spiritual. She wants to punish her mother, and what better way than a forced separation? Yet this protagonist is young and naive. She is oblivious to the implications of her commitment as evidenced by the fact that she does not even know the location of Belgium, the site of her future convent. However, because of her attraction to the younger nun, she sees herself through the veil of fantasy.

> You were in love with her. The radiance that was hers would be yours. You kept thinking towards a distant moment with you on a prie-dieu and nuns all a round you and your parents and Emma in the gallery crying . . . (195)

-- a very romantic and unrealistic appraisal of her future.

O'Brien hints that convent life is not idyllic. Someone

sends the narrator anonymous letters urging her not to enter the convent. "You would come home in disgrace and go mad the way women did who came home from convents" (195), a distinct reference to those who found misery in the spiritual life. As the narrator departs her rural village, "In the convent a name awaits you, a saint's name, but you didn't know it yet" (202). In escaping her sheltered and anonymous life (referring to herself as "you" throughout the novel), she has one brief moment of freedom. (Only once does she refer to herself as "I" - as she leaves her home.) All too soon she will be plunged into namelessness, taking on the appellation of a saint as yet unknown. Such is the fate of women who subvert themselves for a patriarchal ideology.

O'Brien's most famous story concerning the life of nuns is "Sister Imelda" in Returning. Here, her fiction transforms autobiographical vignettes into a nostalgic memory piece capturing the poignancy of unrequited emotions. But this is no ordinary love story, for the lovers are young women caught in the bounds of a restrictive society. Sister Imelda's story appears in other works by O'Brien including Mother Ireland and "A Rose in the Heart." The repetition of this narrative infuses the character with an archetypal quality. The lovely young nun and the adoring student: a relationship destined to fail.

Intense emotions develop in the convent, that world inhabited solely by women. The story is told by the young

student. Immediately, the thrill and fascination that nuns engender are described. Part of that curiosity is the submissive demeanor of Sister Imelda. In one sentence O'Brien distills the essence of a nun's magnetism. "Excitement and curiosity impelled us to follow her and try and see what she looked like, but she thwarted us by walking with head bent and eyelids down" (137). Speaking through the narrator, the author then offers another, more realistic, assessment of Sister Imelda's life. "I pitied her and thought how alone she must be, cut off from her friends and conversation with only God as her intangible spouse" (136). The God-as-husband motif also seen in Sister Baptista's lecture in A Pagan Place reinforces the emphasis on spirit rather than flesh. Nuns were "married" but only on the most spiritual level. The implication is that more earthly marriages with their physical component were infinitely inferior.

From the beginning, the narrator is attracted to Sister Imelda's appearance. "They were the lips of a woman who might sing in cabaret and unconsciously she had formed the habit of turning them inward as if she too were aware of their provocativeness" (138). Later, "Hasn't she wonderful eyes?" (138). Even when her entire body is enveloped in black, Sister Imelda's femininity and sexual nature manages to project itself through her face. When one of the more worldly students questions Sister's decision to enter the convent (after all, she is attractive and has an education), the narrator mimics

the message that drew so many to the religious life.

> Still she had a vocation! I said . . . At certain moments it did seem enticing to become a nun, to lead a life unspotted by sin, never to have babies and to wear a ring singling one out as the Bride of Christ. (138)

O'Brien immediately squashes the hypnotic quality of this language. The rebuke occurs in the next sentence.

> But there was the other side of it, the silence, the gravity of it, having to get up two or three times a night to pray and above all never having the opportunity of leaving the confines of the place [convent] except for the funeral of one's parents. (138)

The fact that a nun's life is so mysterious leads the girls to concoct romantic love stories of broken promises and tragic encounters about Sister Imelda. Loss and sacrifice only fueled the power of imagination in convent life. The ideal of heroic sacrifice coincided with the Church's rhetoric. The language of romance was employed as a seductive element for more spiritual matters. Who could resist the drama of a woman rejecting her earthly lover for a higher good? Or a woman so dedicated to her lost (read: "dead") love that she renounces all and dedicates herself to others? The stories are inspirational, except for the day-to-day drudgery of a restricted life.

Love in the convent -- what expression could it possibly take? The nuns were forbidden sexual relationships with men, so the obvious choices were young students, often lonely, and ripe for affection. Loneliness drew the two groups together in odd relationships that were often replete with sexual tension.

O'Brien does not suggest that overt lesbian behavior was part of convent life. Instead, she presents the unrealized potential for fulfilling love. Flirtations existed, and all the emotions surrounding a sexual relationship were present: jealousy, anger, fear, denial. The language dramatizing these associations definitely reflected a sexual bond which was intimate and passionate.

> 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. (139)

This intimate revelation could be a passage from one of O'Brien's more candid love stories. However, "Sister Imelda" is a love story on its own terms: two females attracted to each other in the hope of fulfillment.

> I had met Sister Imelda outside of class a few times and I felt that there was an attachment between us. Once it was in the grounds when she did a reckless thing. She broke off a chrysanthemum and offered it to me to smell. (140)

The symbolism of intimacy is present but the overt words of love can never be whispered. Given no voice, Sister Imelda remains an enigma and her actions are subject to the narrator's interpretation. However, the author does provide hints that beneath the black veil this nun is still affected by life's trials. "Another time we met in the chapel porch and as she drew her shawl more tightly around her body I felt how human she was, and prey to the cold" (140). Typical of

O'Brien, it is the rote activities of daily life that reveal so much of the soul.

Another episode in the short story has symbolic overtones. To atone for an angry outburst, Sister Imelda presents the narrator with a holy card. No greater gift could be bestowed than this religious memento and therein lies the irony. The card is a representation of religion adopted for an illicit purpose since the implications of the present are deeper than a mere peace offering. The card symbolizes a bond of love that continues to develop between the two.

Using food as a sexual metaphor, O'Brien creates another scene of affection. When Sister Imelda saves some delicious tarts for the narrator, the narrator experiences the first thrilling moments of danger (food sharing was prohibited in the convent), coupled with vague sexual delight (although she does not yet possess the vocabulary to verbalize her feelings). "It was clear to me then that my version of pleasure was inextricable from pain and they existed side by side and were interdependent like the two forces of an electric current" (143).

Their relationship escalates to physical contact but only in the most innocent setting. It could not be otherwise. After a school performance, the narrator sees Sister Imelda. "When I came off stage she put her arm around me and I was encased in a shower of silent kisses" (146) -- romance novel language for a very different couple. Sister Imelda becomes more overt

in her feelings as she confesses, "I missed you" (148) when the narrator returns from Christmas break. Vaguely realizing the implications of their closeness, Sister half-heartedly questions. "You know it is not proper for us to be so friendly" (148). The narrator immediately reacts:

> I dreaded that she might decide to turn away from me, that she might stomp on our love and might suddenly draw a curtain over it, a black crepe curtain that would denote death. 'We must not become attached', she said, and I could not say we already were, no more that I could remind her of the day of the revels and the intimacy between us. Convents were dungeons and no doubt about it. (148)

O'Brien uses an ingenious device to symbolize the consummation of the narrator's and Sister Imelda's love when physical contact is forbidden. What could be more intimate than to learn a secret about the nun's body? As was stated before, the speculations about what was hidden behind the habit prompted unrelenting curiosity and endless speculation. First, the narrator sees the Sister's eyebrow and is thrilled. Then Sister Imelda reveals an intimate secret: her hair is black. In addition, she confesses to the narrator that she spent her last night before entering the convent cycling with a boy. The narrator is ecstatic, and for one brief moment the rigidity and passionless convent wall is breached. These revelations spur the narrator on to a vision of shared convent life. "I made up my mind that I would be a nun and that though we might never be free to express our feelings we would be under the same roof, in the same cloister, in mental and spiritual conjunction all our lives" (150).

The narrator's departure from school dooms the relationship. When lovers are not free to express themselves, the union destructs. The narrator departs, and silence follows. Two years later, she and her friend board the same bus as Sister Imelda. "My heart began to race with a mixture of excitement and dread . . . My fear of her and my love came back in one full realization" (156). While the friend wanted to confront the nuns and rebuke them for past mistreatment, the narrator is embarrassed and wants to escape. The confrontation of past emotions is avoided when the nuns leave the bus first. Did Sister Imelda recognize the girls? The reader will never know. The silent wall of the religious is not scaled. O'Brien concludes the story with a quiet truth filled with poignancy. The narrator speaks: "I knew that there is something sad and faintly distasteful about love's ending, particularly love that has not been fully realized." "In our deepest moments we say the most inadequate things" (158). Once again, deep love is thwarted by the traditions of a confining society. The narrator continues her journey in the secular world while Sister Imelda remains melded to the rituals and restraint of her vocation. These are O'Brien's heroines -- lonely, lost, and unfulfilled in love.

CHAPTER SIX: FEMALE SEXUALITY AND THE IRISH PATRIARCHY

> And sex the forbidden fruit was the glass coach
> in which to do a flit (O'Brien, Mother Ireland 57)

Patriarchy did not develop in a linear fashion or as a unified ideology with the intent of subjugating women. In fact, protection of women was the original reason for rules and laws affecting the female population. In the past, physical power superseded other considerations and women, and children all too often were pawns in male-centered battles for domination. The natural historical progression was for men to protect their families from the threat of enemies, and in so doing, the inequality of women evolved. This topic has already been discussed in Chapter Two, but it is important to recall here the historical background when the topic is sexuality. 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 heredity. What began as a private act between two people escalated into social, political, and cultural realms that remain controversial today. The role of women in society gradually came to involve her sexuality. That the social construct of a female had more to do with her sexuality than any other characteristics is a telling indictment of the male-centered Irish society. Women were chosen or discarded on the basis of sex, and they soon

learned that adherence to male concepts meant

> success or failure -- acceptance or rejection. The class position of women became consolidated and actualized through their sexual relationships. 'Respectable women' gain access to class through their fathers and husbands, but breaking the sexual rules can at once declass them. (Lerner, The Creation of Patriarchy 215)

And who can blame men for wanting to control women's sexuality? After all, the potential to recreate, that is to immortalize the person, is powerful. The desire, indeed the necessity, to continue the species is instinctual in nature, and the perpetuation of the self is dominant in human society as well. "Once patriarchal forms of organization became established, sexuality became problematic. The man had to know the child was his. So the only way to do this was to control the sexual behavior of his wife" (Lerner, The Serpent and the Goddess 86). From the echoes of ancient patriarchy, the significance of women's sexuality within the culture varied throughout the centuries. Sometimes women were able to overcome their biological designation, but the general progression was toward more control of sexuality. Much of this emphasis on females and sex emanated from political, economic, and cultural concerns, and failure to adhere to the laws and traditions resulted in a variety of punishments.

However, when the Catholic Church attained power as a religious force, female sexuality assumed a more crushing and fearsome aspect: sex became sinful. "The Catholic Church in Ireland is renowned for its preoccupation with sexual

morality" (Beal 30). With the Church's emphasis on virginity and sexual transgressions, Irish women were constantly barraged with negative images of sexuality and frightened into compliance with the accepted doctrine. Since the Irish Church and State enforced similar traditions, women were entrusted with the onerous task of preserving Irish morality. "By immoral . . . the Irish invariably mean sexually wayward" (Connery 134). In The Lonely Girls by O'Brien, the heroine Kate, after much guilt and fear, finally has sex with her married lover Eugene. "'You're a ruined woman now,' he said" (317). Although Eugene is being facetious, the choice of word is ironically correct. The prevailing perception was that women who had illicit sex were "ruined." As a matter of fact, Kate is ruined. Her involvement with Eugene eventually leads to unhappiness, divorce, self-mutilation (a hysterectomy), and death. This novel could almost be interpreted as a cautionary tale of punishment for sexual waywardness. However, O'Brien's use of an ironic style makes it clear that the constrictive society, not Kate, is responsible for her tragic life. The religious representatives of the Church, priests and nuns, were accountable for the maintenance of morals, particularly the supervision of sexuality. Priests reinforced doctrine through the confessional while the nuns taught Catholic morality in convent schools.

The confessional was powerful, full of symbolism and imagery. Often, sexuality was a cause for interrogation. As

Inglis writes in Moral Monopoly, women, in particular, were grilled for the specific details of their personal lives.

> If the penitent be a girl, she should be asked whether she has adorned herself in order to please men? Whether for this purpose she has used paint, or stript her arms, shoulders and neck? Whether she has spoken, or read, or sung anything immodest? Whether she is not attached to somebody with a more peculiar affection? Whether she has not allowed herself to be kissed? (150)

The subliminal message is that any contact with men is subject to moral scrutiny, that any sexual feelings are a cause for guilt and shame. In the act of penance there was condemnation.

The influence of the convent schools has already been discussed. As O'Brien reminisces in Mother Ireland, the heightened awareness of potential sin invaded every aspect of existence. However, curiosity about the unknown was rampant. "And sex the forbidden fruit was the glass coach in which to do a flit" (57). None of the girls had the opportunity for actual sexual encounters, so their imaginations were fueled by limited knowledge of the other gender. This ignorance led to wildly imaginative scenarios either of love and passion (from romantic novels) or of drunken and lecherous men (from experiences in their villages). None of this information provided the girls with a basis for actual interaction with men. As a result, the reality of sex was often disappointing after the inflated expectations of fantasy. In The Lonely Girls, Kate reacts to her first sexual encounter, "I felt no pleasure, just some strange satisfaction that I had done what I was born to do" (316). In her fictional creation, the author

mirrors her own experiences, "I don't think I have any pleasure in any part of my body, because my first initial thoughts were blackened by the fear of sin" (Dunn 104).

Much has been made about O'Brien's use of sexuality in her fiction. When she began her career (The Country Girls was published in 1960), sex was the silent, forbidden subject that reeked of damnation. According to Fox-Genovese, "Writing about sex has been largely concealed by women writers" (203). And so it was with O'Brien. However, she broke the taboo and was summarily punished by Irish society. Her books were censored and banned in Ireland. "Virtually any book that was brought to the attention of the Censorship Board and that contained a reference to sexual activity was banned" (Carlson 10). However, she wanted to describe the Irish female's experiences clearly, and sex had to be included in that portrait. Sex does not simply refer to the act of intercourse, the brief fusing of two bodies in passionate abandonment. Rather sexuality is an integral aspect of being and affects the myriad perceptions of life. If sexuality is thwarted and confined, then life will be, too. This is O'Brien's theme. The sexual scenes are written not to shock or titillate but to enlighten, to delve into the psyches of those who had been misdirected or are innocently ignorant. Raymond Popot writes, "The truth is that Edna O'Brien's work is about the suffering and the failure of love" (272). Lorna Sage agrees, "Sex is the glass coach that turns into a pumpkin and so serves, as often as not, to deepen

one's sense of unfulfillment" (87). As O'Brien's characters unfold, the reader experiences the expectations, fears, ignorance, and disappointment of those who cannot achieve a female identity unencumbered by the pressures of a regressive past. Aside from the explicit nature of her descriptions of sexuality, one of the disturbing features of her fiction is the rejection of popular notions of romance and love.

> Conventional old plots of heterosexual seduction and betrayal play a minimal role in contemporary women's fiction. The novelists do not find sexual love redemptive. At best it offers women temporary warmth and sensual exhilaration; more often it confuses women and alienates them from themselves. (Gardiner, "On Female Identity and Writing by Women" 360)

Trapped between a false past and the often disappointing present, O'Brien's heroines mimic the confusion of modern society, especially for women. Sexuality is an essential vehicle for expressing a sense of loss and disillusionment. When O'Brien was asked why she wrote so many love stories, she reflects back on her past for a response.

> 'First of all, I think love replaced religion for me in my sense of fervor. When I began to look for earthly love (i.e. sex) I felt that I was cutting myself off from God . . . The sexual excitement was to a great extent linked with pain and separation.' (Roth, "A Conversation with Edna O'Brien" 40)

Mingling this complexity of love and pain, of spiritual fervor with physical satisfaction, reflects the chaos of emotions that embodies O'Brien's characters.

However, one major problem that O'Brien experiences when writing about sexuality is with her male characters.

Underdeveloped and distant, they remain mysterious and unknowable. This dearth of practical knowledge about the opposite sex parallels the autobiographical nature of O'Brien's work. Raised in a sheltered environment where men were often feared as a potential cause of sin, she did not have the opportunity to judge men's actions objectively. It should be stated that men also lacked the experience to define women on their own terms. "Boys too have distorted images - images of the virgin, the whore, and the mother" (Beal 71). Thus, the genders envisioned each other in stereotypical modes that precluded any meaningful interaction between them.

When O'Brien looked for representations among the men of her rural village and even in her own home, she found lower-class men with limited lives. Her own marriage ended in divorce, and she has never remarried. In an interview with Philip Roth, O'Brien confesses the brutal effect that her father had on her.

> 'Who is the most unforgiving creature in your imagination?' O'Brien answers, 'Up to the time he died - which was a year ago - it was my father . . . Since he died I have written a play about him embodying all his traits - his anger, his sexuality, his rapaciousness, etc. - and now I feel differently toward him. I do not want to relive my life with him or be reincarnated as the same daughter but I do forgive him.' (39)

The traumatic experiences of childhood shaped future relationships. As a result of her truncated interactions with males, O'Brien creates male characters that span the spectrum of negative patriarchal attitudes. Very often they are drunk

(fathers) or unable to show affection for their wives and daughters (abusers) or controlling (Eugene in The Country Girl Trilogy). Many are ignorant and uncouth ("Irish Revels"), reflecting the uneducated inhabitants of her rural village. Unfortunately, few are kind, loving, and compassionate. Even priests use their authority to subvert women's emotions. The portraits are not appealing and definitely biased, but this is O'Brien's world of loss and loneliness. "I don't like gentle writing. It has to be fierce" (O'Brien, Reading at the Folger Library, 1995).

As her female characters attempt to negotiate the male landscape, they encounter situations that affect their attitudes. For example, the girls in the convent often cherished the romantic ideal of self-sacrificing lovers and pure love. They are often horrified when men desire more than kisses. "I loved kissing him. I thought, if only people just kissed, if all love stopped at that," Kate muses in The Lonely Girls (233).

Often a village girl's first opportunity to explore sexuality is destroyed by the men she encounters. Such is the case in "Irish Revels," a story in The Love Object, an innocence-to-experience narrative concerning awakening sexuality. O'Brien combines the ideal of romantic fantasizing with brutal reality. Mary (symbolic of virginity), an innocent country girl, is asked to attend a party at a hotel in town. "Although she was seventeen this was her first party" (87).

Her mother does not want her to participate but Mary is eager for experience. She even daydreams about meeting an English painter named John Roland whom she had spoken with two years before. "The mail-car man said that someone special in the Commercial Hotel expected her. She felt such happiness" (89). The joyful anticipation of fulfilled dreams is evident as Mary rides her bike to the hotel. The subtle use of landscape reverberates with the unspoken theme. Mary rides downhill from her idyllic mountain cottage to the crowded and dilapidated hotel below to face the rawness of life. First, two other girls treat her with shabby disdain because she is from the mountains. Next, the proprietor informs her that contrary to her belief, Mary is a server not a guest. "Quickly, Mary realized that she was being given work to do, and she blushed with shock and disappointment" (92). From desired guest to servant girl -- a symbolic reversal of the "Cinderella" story. Very soon Mary discovers that the person inquiring for her was not her fantasy-created John Roland but "that lad from the slate quarry . . . He's as odd as two left shoes" (93).

The destruction of Mary's dreams gains momentum as the evening begins. The girls criticize Mary's dress, her mother's special lace dress. All the while her disappointment consumes her as she realizes how the party would be "The men would be drunk, the girls giggling. Having eaten, they would dance and sing and tell ghost stories" (96). O'Brien juxtaposes this dreadful scene of the party with Mary's remembrances of her

pure day with John Roland. The fact that the artist was married does not deter Mary from recalling her ride on his motorcycle. The date was magical for its purity, including just enough sexual tension to excite Mary without overstepping the virginal bounds. "They did not talk for miles; she had his stomach encased in the delicate and frantic grasp of a girl in love and no matter how far they rode they seemed always to be riding into a golden haze" (97). Afterwards, they danced and ". . . he confessed that he could not love her, because he already loved his wife and children" (97). He was the sacrificial lover incarnate. How could Mary resist?

The party begins on a negative note and promptly worsens. All pretense of her being a guest is obliterated as she hurriedly serves the food. The sexual aspects of her experience are foreshadowed when one of the male guests squeezes her finger. "She wished that she were home" (99). The inferior position of women is candidly exemplified as the men collect two pounds each to cover the cost of the drinks and "the ladies did not have to pay anything, but were invited so as to lend a pleasant and decorative atmosphere to the party, and, of course, to help" (102). The hidden agenda also included sex, if possible.

As the evening progresses and the men drink excessively, emotions begin to burst forth from propriety. The men dance, and O'Toole (perhaps a symbolic name) asks Mary. She is stimulated by the physical contact but cannot understand what

she is feeling. "She felt funny. Her head was swaying round and round and in the pit of her stomach there was a nice, ticklish feeling that made her want to lie back and stretch her legs. A new feeling that frightened her" (106). Sexual reactions with no context prove troublesome to sheltered Irish girls. On the other hand, had she known that she was experiencing sexual desire, her fear would have been heightened.

The evening deteriorates from pleasant sexual diversions into fear and loathing as O'Toole (drunk and unruly) attempts to drag Mary into another room. Suddenly, all the fears of sexual abandon materialize. She begins to cry and O'Toole retreats but not without cursing the girls. "Wouldn't give a man a squeeze" (110) and he went out cursing each one of them. The subtext is all too familiar. Women were problematic, not men. In the morning, Mary sneaks out and races home. O'Toole had left the porter barrels open, and all the alcohol seeped on the floor and outside. The image is clear. "Outside it washed away as area of frost and revealed the dung of yesterday's fair day" (113). Beneath the loveliness of frost lies dirt and decay. Another implication is that the customs of the past are dead and rotting. Mary's initiation into reality is complete. She sits on a bank of the river wishing that "If only I had a sweetheart, someone to hold on to" (113). She has seen the corrupt life of the city and cannot accept it. Wondering "if all parties are bad," (114) she

retreats to her isolated home in the mountains. Mary's symbolic journey as a seventeen-year-old sets the stage for other O'Brien heroines who continue to seek the romantic ideal in spite of overwhelming evidence that it is unattainable.

The failure of men and women to connect is not the only problem with sexuality. O'Brien deals with the forces that envelop a woman's flawed knowledge of sex. Her protagonists inhabit rural and provincial areas of Ireland where the subject of sex is unspoken. As a result, ignorance, fear, superstition, and guilt are instilled through the society and affect the ability of objective learning. In narrative after narrative, O'Brien details the accumulation of events, images, and myths that women are subjected to when they seek to discover sexuality. This chaotic assembly of half truths, exaggerations, and lies guarantees that women will remain unable to explore their sexual nature.

The fear of men is encouraged. What better way to prevent wanton conduct and illegitimate pregnancies than to protect the women from contact with the opposite sex? Fear was a powerful deterrent. O'Brien's memories in Mother Ireland echoes in other narratives.

> And even on the best of days with the sun shining . . . a sort of terror lurked. Might the men undo their breeches, especially the man on the dole who made a specialty of it and who dragged girls into the swamp where they became helpless. (50)

The "Bogeyman" with sexual overtones was enough to emblazon

terror onto a young girl's psyche. A similar episode occurs in A Pagan Place.

> Going home drunk he took off his breeches by the water pump and when girls and women went by, he said Come here, missie, until I do pooly in you, but if the guards or the Sergeant went by he insisted that he was having a footbath. (20)

The language is also indicative of ignorance since the girl simply repeats the strange word "pooly" without comprehension of its meaning. In the same novel, teenage girls and older women increased the dread by describing exaggerated scenes that horrify the innocent.

> Mabel made a face at herself and then asked if I had a boy yet. The word boy like the word haemorrhage threatened to make me faint. She said soon I would have a boy and to be careful not to let him lay a finger on me because it was a well known fact that one could get a craze for it and end up ruined . . . (94)

The humor of this passage is tempered by the girl's overwrought reaction to lies.

This apprehension of men was coupled with an ignorance and fright of one's own body. "Large numbers of young Irish women are ignorant of many basic facts about their own bodies" (Beal 87). The female body has consistently been admired for its beauty and power to nurture life. Yet an ambivalence remains, for the body can also stimulate sexual desire and become an "occasion of sin." As a result, women were reluctant to examine their bodies fully, believing, erroneously, that the less they knew about themselves physically, the purer they would be. The opposite happened as this ignorance engendered

shame and guilt. O'Brien remembers, "I have never sort of examined my entire body. Even if I look at it I don't examine it because of my squeamishness. The words vagina and womb, these words still fill me with terror" (Dunn 104).

O'Brien's experiences are recast in The Country Girls. Caithleen recalls the nun's admonition against the female body. "One expression of modesty is the way a girl dresses and undresses. She should do so with decorum and modesty . . . In an open dormitory like this, girls are requested to dress and undress under the shelter of their dressing gowns" (68). This exaggerated modesty extended to other activities. For example, many O'Brien heroines mention the fact that crossing one's legs is sinful and should be avoided, especially in church; it is a sign of outrageous immodesty to cross legs. "All Mabel did was smirk and cross her legs which was a disrespectful thing to do in a holy place" (O'Brien, "Savages" 103). This same heroine in "Savages" describes how her mother was shocked to receive a gift from Mabel of pale-blue silk pyjamas. Both mother and daughter overreact to the seemingly harmless gift.

> I could see my mother's reaction - immense disappointment that was bordering on disgust . . . For another thing pyjamas were shameful, sinful. Men wore pyjamas, women wore nightgowns. Shame and disgrace. My mother folded them up quickly so as not to let my father see them, in case it gave him ideas. (88)

Characterizing pyjamas as symbols of sin and wanton sexuality demonstrates the heightened awareness of sex even in the most innocuous things.

In "Sisters" from A Scandalous Woman and Other Stories, O'Brien exposes the impact of women's ignorance. The young narrator has been sexually abused and does not realize what has happened. Her innocence is so complete that it allows others to take advantage of her without punishment. Her confusion and vague feeling of violation are apparent but she cannot verbalize her uneasiness:

> . . . but Creena was in terror, because one day, in fact Good Friday [how ironic], he had called her into the office, lifted her dress up and touched her under her dress with his handkerchief, and then given her a shilling. She asked him to deduct the shilling from their outstanding bill, whereupon he laughed, touched her again, warned her to tell no one, said if she did she would be carried off to the Shannon by an evil spirit. The shilling was long spent on cachoux, a lace-edged hanky and a candle to atone for whatever the thing was that had taken place. (123-4)

The reader must feel overwhelming sadness as the innocent girl tries to evaluate the confusing events that she cannot quite fathom. Yet she feels that something was wrong since she lights a candle in atonement. The irony is that she has no idea what the atonement is for.

Creena probably would not have accused her attacker of sexual abuse, since women were indoctrinated with the concept that sex was sinful and resulted in eternal punishment. Caithleen in The Lonely Girls shares her fears: "I knew that I was about to do something terrible. I believed in hell, in eternal torment by fire" (228). Even when Caithleen desires to make love to Eugene, her conscience will not allow her any peace. "Shame stifled me as I remembered the soft bed, with

the nice smell of clean linen and an owl crying in one of the pine trees" (242). According to Beal, "Women who have chosen to reject the teaching on the sinfulness of sex outside marriage often have to deal with the inevitable guilt" (93).

That guilt even extends to shame for others. Women were encouraged to believe that they were responsible when men lost control. In the short story "Courtship" in Returning, the young protagonist struggles with a potential seducer. She has heard the superstitious beliefs of others, "A woman had told me that if tickled on the palm of the hand, or behind the knees, one could become wanton and lose control" (119). Therefore, when the young man attempts to caress her hand, she panics. He becomes more insistent, and she refuses to uncross her legs (another superstition); he then licks her ear, causing her to cry out in shock and fear. "When he left the cinema he was livid. He said why do such a thing, why egg him on with ringlets and smiles and them make a holy show of him" (119). Her pathetic and humble response is to apologize. "I said sorry" (119). An apology from the violated -- so consistent with a damaged perception. The assault continues with a threatened rape, and the only way she can escape is by feigning hysteria. "As his advances were now rapid, I knew there was nothing for it but to have a fit" (120). Taking on the sins of man was a woman's duty in patriarchy.

Even when an Irish woman was married, the blight of sexuality stalked her. "To the Catholic Church marriage is the

only proper place for sex, and even then only if it is meant for the procreation of children" (Beal 75). Enjoyment of sex under any circumstances was discouraged, even in the marriage bed. Influenced by the directive that sex was solely for procreation, women were taught that sex was a duty to be performed as quickly and as infrequently as possible. O'Brien provides ample evidence of married women's struggles with the sexual aspects of marriage. Many of her characters are mothers who perpetuate their ignorance in their daughters.

If sex is primarily for creating children, Irish women had a dilemma. Their lower economic status, combined with too many children, ensured a lifetime of deprivation. Since birth control was banned in Ireland, the rural wife had to cope with primitive means of preventing conception. However, ironically, the conscious choice to impede conception resulted in a condemned act. Damned in this world or damned in the next, naturally, the sexual act could not be a joyful manifestation of love. O'Brien describes how women attempted, often in vain, to circumvent the cultural directive to be a mother. In A Pagan Place the narrator reports how sex occurred in her home.

> Your father . . . put his hand under her chin and forced her face up, told her to smile, smile, told her she was getting old, told her she had wrinkles, called her Mud, short for mother. She had to go across the landing to his room. An edict. (29)

The economy of O'Brien's prose allows the subtext to emerge. The resentment of both the mother and father about sex, the cruel remarks about her appearance and the edict to show up in

bed are certainly the antithesis of passionate chapters in romantic novels. As the mother prepares for her duty, the candid description underlies the mother's desperation:

> Before she went across the landing she put tissue paper in the inside of her pussy. It made a crinkly noise . . . she saved tissue paper from the boxes that new shoes came in. Over there she moaned and groaned. His sinews cracked. (29)

That the mother would have to resort to tissue paper inside herself increases the image of sexual violation. O'Brien also relies on the language to create a dual image of "moaning and groaning." On the one hand there is the literal interpretation of sounds that emanate from those enjoying sexual intercourse. On the other, the mother may be verbalizing her mourning for her predicament.

In another narrative, "A Rose in the Heart," the protagonist is older and more jaded. Nevertheless, she recounts a similar tale, documenting the fear that young girls had when their fathers demanded their marital rights.

> As before the girl slept with her mother . . . then trembled while her mother went along to her father's bedroom, for a tick, to stop him bucking. The consequences of those visits were deterred by the bits of tissue paper, a protection between herself and any emission. No other child got conceived . . . (119).

Apparently, this primitive birth control was occasionally successful.

The unusual sleeping arrangements in an Irish household contributed to the separateness of sex and marriage. In O'Brien's fiction, the young narrators often share their

mother's beds and the mothers make conjugal visits to the father's bedroom. However, sometimes the father does not wait for his wife, and the child is an unwilling witness to intercourse.

> When her father got in she tried not to look, not to listen, not to see, not to hear, not to be. She moved over to the wall, smelt the damp of the paper and could even smell the mortar behind the paper . . . Shame, shame, shame. Always for one second, a dreadful swoon used to overwhelm her too. Her bones and every bit of her dissolved. (146)

After this traumatic encounter, her father leaves and she is alone with her mother. They ate chocolates. "They were so soothing, and so satisfying after the onslaught. Then the worst was over for a week or so, until it happened again" (146). This horrific description of sex within the family can only bring negative repercussions in the life of the young narrator.

References to sex as a duty appear in a number of O'Brien stories. While men perpetuate the myth that women owe them sex, it is the women who absorb the message. The reader both laughs at the innocence of the protagonists and is simultaneously shaken by the sincere acceptance of a flawed ideology. In "A Rose in the Heart," the archetypal tale is repeated.

> When she married she had escaped the life of a serving girl, the possible experience of living in some grim institution but as time went on and the trousseau drawer was emptied of gifts, she saw that she was made to serve in an altogether other way. When she wasn't screaming she was grinding her head into the pillow and praying for it to be all over. (109)

The narrator is tragically correct. In fleeing one "grim institution," she had been trapped in another.

Finally, the erroneous message from mother to daughter was "grin and bear it [sex]." In The Country Girl Trilogy, both Kate and Baba receive advice from their mothers which would affect their sexual lives for a lifetime. Kate is the romantic one and sees life through dramatic occurrences: "He kissed me. I looked away. I had been brought up to think of it as something unmentionable, which a woman had to pretend to like, to please her husband" (226). Baba, conversely, has a more realistic appreciation of the flawed directives inbred when she was young. She recognizes the fallacy in the message but can still not prevent her entrapment in marriage. The difference is that she faces her demons and attempts to confide in her mother, seeking advice. The mother's reply is predictable considering her traditional orientation:

> . . . it's just that I didn't tell her things, but I did mention this physical ordeal and she said it would be all right, to just grit my teeth and suffer it. She said that it was because of physical attraction that most marriages went wallop . . . (386)

indicating that it probably was more realistic and less painful not to love your spouse, which, of course, is a contradiction of love.

O'Brien portrays the spectrum of Irish women and their sexual lives from provincial wives, to hopeful young colleens and jaded "women of the world." No Irish female author before O'Brien had attempted such a task, and she herself is not

completely successful. When she was asked, "Do you find sex scenes difficult to write, considering your puritanical background?" and she replied, "Not really. When you are writing you are not conscious of the reader, so that you don't feel embarrassed" (Guppy, "The Art of Fiction" 264). Perhaps O'Brien is not embarrassed for the reader, but she is definitely aware of the questionable, perhaps sinful, nature of sexual rhetoric. O'Brien is a product of her strict upbringing and does not overcome the deeply ingrained prohibitions easily. "She writes of sex explicitly but with a wonder and awe that is completely at odds with the modern, urban sensibility" (O'Brien, Darcy 186).

To say that her work is sexually explicit is to overstate the case. For a Catholic, Irish female writing in the nineteen sixties and seventies, these passages may seem shockingly erotic, but O'Brien's indoctrination into demure womanhood keeps asserting itself. She resists reducing sex to a listing of body parts, breasts, thighs, and penises. Nor does her account resemble a textbook manual of sexual activity. In addition, she rarely includes the coarser expletives of sexual profanity and when she does, these words are usually spoken by a man. Most of her heroines, in spite of their erotic tendencies, are not conditioned to blurt out forbidden language. For all their interest in sex, her characters retain their childhood inhibitions. The irony of naive women aspiring to be casual and sophisticated about "sinful" sexual pleasure

adds an undercurrent of confused emotions to these erotic scenes.

> She nearly always includes sensations or atmospheres of guilt which heighten the pleasure and pain, generating a painful pleasure and an intensity that reminds us of how much we lost when we decided that sex was normal and healthy and nothing more to worry about than bacon and cabbage. (O'Brien, Darcy 186)

In striving to write accurately about sexuality in a subtle manner, the author resorts to a number of styles and approaches. Sometimes the sex is constrained within vague language, sometimes the episodes are candidly humorous, and sometimes O'Brien exploits the heightened vocabulary of the romantic novel.

Veiled references to eroticism predominate. Occasionally, the language almost becomes metaphorical, recalling a time when overt sexual references were forbidden. In A Pagan Place when the priest masturbates, the young narrator employs awkward and imprecise wording to chronicle the event.

> He caught hold of himself and pruned and elongated it and squashed it and treated it like dough. Never were you more incongruous, never were you more unnecessary . . . he strained and he writhed and he imprecated, and begged for it to be over, for his joy and his agony to end. While he yelled a great gout of stuff shot out. (178)

The portrayal of sex, seen through the eyes of an inexperienced girl, succeeds on two levels. First, an erotic activity is described without graphic language, and, second, the sensuous aura surrounding sexual release is objectified, losing its mystery.

The same technique is used in "Paradise," a story in The Love Object. The omniscient narrator delineates a tale of an insecure adult woman involved in doomed love. The protagonist is sexually experienced and definitely not inhibited. Yet when the narrator begins to describe oral sex, initiated by the female character, graphic details are buried in undefined pronouns.

> 'Take it out,' she said, 'I want it now.' Timorous and whim mad. How he loves it . . . She waited for one excruciating moment and made him wait. Then she knelt and as she began he muttered between clenched teeth...she applied herself to it, sucking, sucking with all the hunger that she felt . . . Threatening to maim him she always just grazed with the edges of her five square teeth. Nobody intruded. It took no more than minutes. (140-41)

Again, there is an undertone to the passage that is oddly unerotic, almost as if sex were a chore to be completed as quickly as possible.

This constrained account of lust coupled with a juxtaposition of the stark realities surrounding the sexual act again appears in "The Love Object."

> Even my nipples about which I am squeamish did not shrink from his rabid demands.I wanted to do everything and anything for him. As often happens with lovers my ardour and inventiveness stimulated his. We stopped at nothing. Afterwards remarking on our achievement - a thing he always did - he reckoned it was the most intimate of all our intimate moments. I was inclined to agree. (16)

O'Brien destroys this sentimental romantic encounter immediately as the narrator adds, "As we stood up to get dressed he wiped his armpits with the white blouse I had been

wearing and asked which of my lovely dresses I would wear tonight" (16). The afterglow of "ardour and inventiveness" is reduced to an unpleasant sanitary consideration. This combination of dreamy love and expectation encased in romantic rhetoric with surprising comical details is a unique stylistic feature of O'Brien's fiction.

Humor is often present when O'Brien's Irish heroines confront sex. This use of humor and sex is highly unusual in Irish literature. According to Kilroy, "Typically, sexual passion, rather than pleasurable physical attraction, is treated in [Irish] fiction and it is a serious matter, a brooding concern" (17). In some cases, O'Brien superimposes the humor on a seemingly serious scene. In "Mrs. Reinhardt," the protagonist is grappling with questions of sexuality after her husband leaves her for another woman.

> As she is taking a shower, her young lover climbed in through the window and came directly to her. He did not realize that he was getting drenched. The shower was full on, yet neither of them bothered to turn it off. The zip of his trousers hurt her but he was mindless to all that. (210)

Wanton sex in the shower with clothes getting wet and a threatening zipper -- O'Brien has fun with the logistics of passion.

When Kate in The Country Girl Trilogy attempts to act sophisticated and "grown up," physical necessities interfere.

> He kissed me. It was a real kiss. It affected my entire body. My toes, though they were numb [from the cold] and pinched in the new shoes, responded to that kiss, and for a few minutes my soul was

> lost. Then I felt a drip off the end of my nose and it bothered me. (90)

And when she actually sees Mr. Gentleman naked for the first time (in fact, any man naked), her reaction is humor rather than fear or awe.

> He opened his braces and let his trousers slip down around his ankles . . . He was not half so distinguished out of his coal black suit and stiff white shirt . . . I looked down slyly at his body and laughed a little it was so ridiculous . . . 'It's the color of the pale part of my orchid,' I said. I touched it . . . it stirred. It reminded me when it stirred of a little black man on top of a penny bank that shook his head every time you put a coin in the box. (164-65)

O'Brien's mastery of language and image is consummate here. Genitals are described through vivid imagery of flowers and childhood toys, and these images create a humorous undertone that demolishes any mystical pretentions surrounding Kate's first sexual encounter.

O'Brien has been criticized for incorporating the florid, overwritten style of romantic novels into her fiction. To some extent, this assessment is accurate. After all, O'Brien admits reading romantic novels while in the cloistered confines of the convent, and these books fired her imagination. According to Elaine Showalter in A Literature of Their Own, "Women couldn't really write about sex because they didn't know enough about it" (28). While O'Brien succeeds in conquering some of the lingering excesses of heightened romantic language, she still occasionally succumbs to "bodice-ripping" phraseology. This tendency is especially prevalent when her

heroines daydream about love. Their fantasy world is overflowing with secret, romantic rendezvous and self-sacrificing lovers -- truly the world of the romance novel.

Mrs. Reinhardt's musings (in Mrs. Reinhardt) about an uninhibited sexual affair are typical.

> Before the week was out she would lead him to her bed. It would be dark and it would be unexpected, an invitation tossed at the very last minutes when someone takes a flower or a handkerchief and throws it into the bullring. She would be unabashed, as she had not been for years. (209)

In "Forgetting" a story in Mrs. Reinhardt, the narrator infuses her lost love with visions of beauty and sacrifice.

> She stared ahead at the poplars, like guardsmen along the mountainside, and then higher up at the wooded peaks, that in their own dusk were like beings breathing with life and impregnation. She would never forget him, she did not want to forget him, he could be part of her, and this invisible presence would be inside her like a watch, ticking and hidden, a source of new, faithful, imperishable energy. (156)

Finally, in "The Love Object," the vision of reunited lovers in the misty city is portrayed.

> I enacted various kinds of reunion with my lover, but my favourite one was an unexpected meeting in one of those tiled, inhuman, pedestrian subways and running towards each other and finding ourselves at a stairway which said 'To central island only' and laughing as we leaped up those stairs propelled by miraculous wings. (37)

This elaborate language is also incorporated into the narratives as the heroines seek the correct terminology to indicate what occurred. During her first sexual experience, Kate in The Lonely Girls mimics the heightened romantic imagery of lovers' tales to describe Eugene's orgasm: "little

moans and kisses, kisses and little cries that he put into my body, until at last he expired on me and washed me with his love" (316). Use of imagery reinforces the idea that Kate would not even know the technical, medical terminology and would envelope the sexual act in the realm of romance.

The clash between women's sexuality and the conservative forces of Irish patriarchy was inevitable. "It was women who felt the full impact of the traditional moral code in their personal life" (Beal 13). Through the actions and voices of her personal narrators, O'Brien chronicled the constricting culture that warped women's perceptions of themselves as sexual beings. Many of her younger protagonists innocently unfold stories of limitations, denial and guilt. However, one monologue in Girls in Their Married Bliss verbalizes the frustration of adult women in an unequal society. Baba, the feisty alter-ego of Kate, in The Country Girl Trilogy is rebellious and fearless. She has a realistic view of the world and is not duped into submission. Nevertheless, even knowledgeable females cannot fully escape. Forced to endure an internal examination (unwanted penetration) for a suspected pregnancy, she lashes out at the insensitivity of the doctor and the culture in general. Her rage becomes a primal scream of injustice:

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

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE CONTINUING RELEVANCE OF O'BRIEN'S FICTION

> "I want to write about something that would apply to all time because it's a state of the soul," said Edna O'Brien. (Woodward 52)

There are many Irish perspectives -- Catholic, Protestant, male, female, rich, poor. In 1960, Edna O'Brien gave a voice to the silent, submissive Catholic women of rural Ireland. The impact of her characters on the religious, political, and cultural ideology of the time was immediate and enduring. Although powerful forces of the ruling patriarchy attempted to bury O'Brien's revelations under the cloud of censorship, her truthful portrayals prevailed. Today, O'Brien's fiction is read in her native country, a "pagan place" she can never escape, either emotionally of psychically.

Ireland has undergone a transformation. Certainly, the onslaught of modernization has altered this small country. Social and political changes have occurred -- slowly -- but the Irish continue to be ambivalent about the restructuring of their traditional lives and laws. Conservative attitudes are not unusual in "this country of 3.5 million people, 95 percent of them Catholic" (Clarity 1). Although the Irish political structure has nominally severed its ties with the Catholic Church, religion continues to be a formidable foe of liberal policies. As late as the 1980's, "In Ireland, most feminist

activity had been restricted to educated women in Dublin and had little impact on rural life since independence" (Beal 38).

Progressive elements in Ireland can claim some victories. The abhorrent censorship practices that censured O'Brien's literary works are no longer enforced. Irish women today are permitted to pursue careers outside the home without fear of being ostracized from the community. The Irish Republic even has a female president, Mary Robinson, although the prime minister is male. However, "It was not until the Family Planning Act of 1979 that married women in the Republic were legally entitled to fertility control" (DeSalvo xix). Even today, Irish women must leave the country to have an abortion.

One of the most explicit examples of the pressures that anguish modern Ireland occurred recently (November 25, 1995) when the citizens voted to remove the seventy-year-old constitutional ban on divorce. The rhetoric and scenarios surrounding the vote eerily resemble episodes from an O'Brien narrative. Echoing Mother Ireland, the anti-divorce factions held prayer vigils in the center of Dublin, "singing hymns, holding candles and saying the rosary" (Toibin A35). The Catholic hierarchy resorted to guilt and fear as appropriate weapons to convince the populace. "One bishop said Catholics who divorced and remarried would be denied the sacraments, including communion and last rites for dying" (Clarity A10).

Salvation continues to be a strategic method for making the Irish citizens comply. The frenzied rhetoric of opposing

factions is common in most political clashes. However, in their zeal to capture Irish souls and reassert the supremacy of traditional Catholicism, the hierarchy utilized the prime authority of the Church, the Pope. This was not the first time that Pope John Paul II interfered in the political process of Ireland. Once before, he had exhorted the women of Ireland to consider marriage and motherhood as their primary vocation, instead of seeking fulfillment in other careers. This time the Pope said:

> Our Savior has shown how the nature of love that unites a man and woman in marriage, and the good of the children, calls for total fidelity on the part of the spouses and an unbreakable unity between then. I urge everyone to reflect on the importance for society of the indissoluble character of the marriage bond. ("Vote on Irish Divorce Ban Nears" A6)

The rhetoric resonates with the descriptive power of religious imagery in O'Brien's fiction. The repeal of the divorce ban passed by the narrowest of margins: "50.2 to 49.8 percent" (Clarity A1). The country, indeed, continues to be split between the old traditions and the new liberalization.

In addition, Ireland is still divided politically: the South is a republic, and the North remains an English colony. In her most recent novel, O'Brien explores these artificial and man-made boundaries. For O'Brien, Ireland is the land, the country itself. Those who inhabit it are forever changed. "History is everywhere. It seeps into the soil, the subsoil. Like rain, or hail, or snow or blood. A house remembers. An outhouse remembers. A people ruminate. The tale differs with

the teller." This recognition of Ireland's haunting past introduces House of Splendid Isolation, O'Brien's imaginary voyage into the tragedy of a separate Ireland. "It's like no place in the world. Wild. Wildness" (3). Irish history and the author's history intersect to create the female characters who inhabit this troublesome landscape. Reinforcing her belief, "Suffering is not a gratuitous ingredient in fiction; it's very central to it. I think pain deepens people" (McQuade 48), O'Brien's heroine experiences familiar themes of loneliness and loss. Against a broad background of territorial warfare, the female individual must cope with the isolation of self, the loss of love, and her burden of childlessness. The troubled political scenario of Ireland is superimposed on a more universal quandary, the failure of spiritual communication with another. As in other O'Brien narratives where Irish society and the Church create unfulfilled lives, this novel employs the metaphor of a severed Ireland. The result is the same. In other words, the heroine cannot survive in this wartorn male world any more than O'Brien's other protagonists could triumph over the patriarchal system. Inevitably, she dies, victim of a stray bullet. The symbolic destruction of Irish womanhood is mirrored in this dramatic murder. Destruction of the Irish by their fellow countrymen(women) is a tragic waste, for the land cannot be possessed. "It weeps, the land does, and small wonder. But the

land cannot be taken. History has proved that. The land will never be taken. It is there" (232).

It is the extraordinary paradox of love and hate for Ireland and its traditions that makes O'Brien's fiction so riveting and timeless. She writes about a specific strata of Irish society and their troubles, in essence the patriarchal constraints on women. Yet her work encompasses Ireland itself, the ancient land ". . . what beautiful countryside, what serenity, what a beautiful tragic country to be born into" (O'Brien, House of Splendid Isolation 173). The juxtaposition of a striking, spacious, unbounded landscape and the constricting society inhabiting this territory transforms her work into a study of humanity, reminding the reader that visual beauty can mask desperation and unhappiness.

As for the author herself, she continues to explore the imagination through her fiction. O'Brien has revealed a great deal about her work and philosophy in a number of interviews and talks. Inevitably, many of the questions revolve around her continued fascination, some would say obsession, with Ireland and her childhood memories. When she was asked, "Do you think after all these years that through your books you have exorcised the demons and can let them rest?" She replied, "I hope not, because one needs one's demons to write" (Guppy 257). Again, at a recent reading at the Folger Library in Washington, D.C., a participant inquired about her heroines and their similar problems, implicitly asking whether her

stories were repetitive. O'Brien's response reflects the permanence of human pain. She said, "Most troubles are old." Finally, when Dan Cryer questioned why her heroines suffer so much, she responded:

> Fiction should be in its way subversive. I don't think books should be neat or gentle or genteel or comforting. They should be raw. They should be written as perfectly as possible, but what they do is stir up, to lance the reader. (37)

She does admit, however, that she must search more deeply for inspiration as she continues her career. "The first book is the easiest. It is waiting to come out like a song. It gets harder [to write] and you get harder on yourself" (O'Brien, Reading at the Folger Library). She need not worry about her creativity. Through her original images and tales, O'Brien has magnified a specific Irish, Catholic, and female world to reflect the desires of all women for identity and self-fulfillment unencumbered by the faulty vision of a patriarchal culture.

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