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The Scandalous Women of Edna O'Brien: Forces Against Female Authenticity

by

Rita Donlon

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The City University of New York

1998

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Introduction

Many Irish women writers were incensed at the fact that in over four thousand pages of text in *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (1991), fewer than two hundred pages were devoted to female writers. Nineteen pages were devoted to the diatribes of an Ian Paisley, but no space was allocated to the works of Kathleen Coyle, Molly Keane, Dervla Murphy, Joan Lingard, Polly Devlin, Clare Boylan, or Maeve Binchy. Bernadette Devlin's *The Price of My Soul* (an account of the Derry March in 1969) is given five pages, while Edna O'Brien, who has written several novels, plays and short stories over a period of thirty-five years receives a meager four.

This is part of an old story. The reluctance to take Irish women writers seriously is more complicated that a mere show of male chauvinism. Men in Ireland have certain expectations of women. A woman like Edna O'Brien who has had the courage and audacity to bring female sexual desire out of the closet makes many Irish men and women very uncomfortable. Historically,

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Irish women writers such as Lady Augusta Gregory have written about myths and folktales, or have created harmless little plays about idealized peasant life, and Maria Edgeworth in her *Castle Rackrent* launched an interest in the Big House novel, which was perpetuated by Kate O'Brien, Elizabeth Bowen and Molly Keane. However, no Irish woman writer before Edna O'Brien had written so realistically about the conditions and problems of women.

It was not until 1960, when Edna O'Brien left her native Tuamgraney, County Clare, for England, and during her first month there wrote *The Country Girls* while still in her twenties, did any Irish woman writer dare to write about human desire in an explicit way, and expose some of the closely concealed repression in the lives of ordinary people. This novel was quickly followed by *The Lonely Girl* (1962), and *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964), which were later republished as *The Country Girls Trilogy and Epilogue* (1986). These novels, which seem so innocent in retrospect, created havoc in Ireland, and were immediately banned by the Censorship Board. O'Brien revealed, in an interview with Richard B. Woodward (50), that four copies of her first book *The Country Girls* found their way to a store in Limerick. Her mother

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informed her that a country woman had bought one of the copies and promptly had a seizure. The other three copies were purchased by the local parish priest, who was joined by some local women for a little ritual burning on parish grounds. O'Brien also relates how a man who had heard her on the radio wrote to tell her how he had stayed in her mother's house in Tuamgraney when the local hotel had no vacancy. Mrs. O'Brien handed him one of her daughter's books, and asked him what he thought of it. When he praised it, she admitted that she had never been able to read any of Edna's books (Byrne 19).

When her mother died a few years later, O'Brien went back to her mother's house and discovered one of her novels buried under a pile of bolsters: every offending word had been carefully encircled in black and certain passages had been stroked out entirely. O'Brien was so frustrated and angry at the discovery that she wanted to confront the very ghost of the dead woman who still had the power to hurt her (Woodward 50). Because of the scandal caused by her "wicked books" her parents were too ashamed to be proud of their daughter's achievements.

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When O'Brien became a regular guest on radio and television talk shows, in some quarters in Ireland her new celebrity status suddenly added a certain validity to her work. But when she was invited to open the Oyster Festival in Galway, the Bishop of Galway, Michael Browne, did all in his power to stop her. Unsuccessful in his attempts to ban her, he backed down only on condition she not be allowed to stay at the Great Southern Hotel ("Galway Baying" 26).

Edna O'Brien's books are now widely read in Ireland, but many women of the old school avoid her works like cow manure. Irish male critics are still divided about her work, and constantly refer to her as "Bedna" or "The darlin girl from Clare." However, Irish male writers too have difficulty dealing with desire in fiction. They are more comfortable writing about history or politics. John Wilson Foster writes in *Field Day Anthology* (vol. III: 937):

> Sexual love is on the whole handled badly, when at all, by Irish male writers. It is odd, though, that Irish male writers have hardly considered it worth exploring love and sex as avenues of escape from history and politics (Bernard Mac Laverty's *Cal* is an uncommon exception and exhibits the difficulties), even if they are subsequently rejected. Among current women writers,

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> Edna O'Brien has most notably continued to explore the theme of love. but male writers show reluctance to engage her fiction. possibly for this reason.

O'Brien. however. writeands about much more than sex. She writes about childhood. betrayal. and loneliness. Though studded with comic wit. her work is rarely upbeat. Her big subject is loss. Her short stories are especially powerful. and in some cases prove more so than her novels. Like Hawthorne. some of her novels like *Night* and *Casualties of Peace* are like long short stories or novellas. while her more recent works like *House of Splendid Isolation* and *DownBy the River* are full-length novels. Her work encompasses the short story. the novella and the novel with equal skill. Her few attempts at drama seem less successful.

O'Brien leaves the reader who can withstand her sometimes irritating digressions with a sense of deep sadness. She renders the inarticulate but observant child with uncanny accuracy. It is unnerving to witness the paralysis of her female protagonists. who seem reminiscent of the characters in Joyce's *Dubliners*. She openly acknowledges Joyce and Chekhov as her literary masters.

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The Joycean influence is evident in many of her short stories. and especially on the novel *Night* where Mary Hooligan. like an older and wiser Molly Bloom. rhapsodizes about her sexual highlights and blunders.

II

Ireland's attitude toward women in society and art has been colored by both Nationalism and Catholicism. Joyce. Yeats. Synge. and O'Casey as writers reacted to these pressures in Irish society. Joyce had the good sense to leave Ireland. and. when he came to write. the good fortune to remember how it really had been. He never quite got Ireland. the old sow who ate her farrow. out of his system. And although his famous portrayal of the life-affirming Molly Bloom. celebrates the female spirit, Joyce also saw women as naturally passive. His protagonist Stephen Hero refers to Emma, the object of his love, as the most "cowardly of marsupials" as "He toyed also with a theory of dualism which would symbolise the twin eternities of spirit and nature in the twin eternities of male and female" (*Stephen Hero* 210). Joyce thought of male as primarily spirit, female primarily nature. In a letter to

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Frank Budgen, dated August 16, 1921, Joyce discusses the Penelope episode of *Ulysses*. Here he views " *woman, yes....* amoral fertilisable untrustworthy engaging shrewd limited prudent indifferent..." (*Selected Letters of James Joyce* 285).

Yeats had wrestled with his body and soul theory, and with his inordinate desire for the free wheeling beauty Maud Gonne for years. Partly as a result of this frustration, and partly because of the Censorship Act, he wrote his blatantly sexual Crazy Jane poems; Jane of course had to be considered crazy to talk openly about sex. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* had provoked riots in 1907 at Dublin's Abbey Theater, because the line, "...a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts itself" (*Complete Plays* 75) had defiled the image of Irish womanhood so important to the Nationalists; the play closed amid a storm of protest. Synge's women were not ones to tolerate repression for too long. Nora *In the Shadow of the Glen* leaves the prison of her loveless life with old Dan Burke to follow the free and romantic life with the tramp. Deirdre of *Deirdre of the Sorrows* also rejects the offer of a loveless marriage to old King Conchuber and escapes for a time with the young Naisi. Only Maurya of *Riders to the Sea*

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accepts her lot with stoic acceptance. O'Casey's women also show spirit: as Juno of *Juno and the Paycock* leaves Captain Jack to his drunken fantasies, while she strikes out with her pregnant daughter Mary to fend for them both. Mary's child she claims, may have no father but "will have two mothers" which in her way of reckoning is infinitely better. In Catholic Ireland this would not have been accepted as a viable solution to domestic problems. O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* also caused riots with the Nationalists because of his portrayal (or betrayal) of their cause.

It is wise to keep in mind that Yeats, Synge, and O'Casey were all of Protestant stock which in many ways gave them the temerity to write of Ireland as they saw it, and not as the Nationalists wished it to be.

III

The voice of woman has not always been a weak one. If we trace the female archetypes back to the ancient Celtic myths, we do not find that shrinking violet the Irish colleen, who until recently, has adorned the Irish pound note. The stereotyped colleen has no place in Irish legend according to Lorna Reynolds in her essay

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"Irish Women in Legend. Literature and Life." In Irish legend we discover rather, robust earthy women like Queen Maeve of Connaught. In Irish religion we find the White Goddess. otherwise known as the Great Mother Goddess, Lady of the Harvest, of the barley. Goddess of germination and growth, love, and battle. There was also Dana of the Tuatha de Danaan (Reynolds 11-12). Synge also turns to mythical sources with his Deirdre, and Yeats with Aoife, one of the loves of Cuchulain who gave birth to his son. The earth Goddess, Macha, is also invoked at harvest time. Many of the goddesses were appropriated by Christianity. The Goddess Brigid, daughter of the Dagda, survived the Christian purge and became Saint Brigid, and remained the patron of cattle and flocks. Ana or Anu became Saint Anne. Dana or Danu, from whose womb sprang the pre-Celtic gods, is by some scholars also associated with Saint Anne. Seamus Heaney too has come to realize the great source of rejuvenation and regeneration offered by the old myths. Tired of the strife and politics of war ravaged Northern Ireland, he turns to the Fertility Goddess Nerthus for inspiration. His poems "Bog Queen" and "Nerthus" are examples of this (*Poems 1968-1978*: 127 and 187).

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Irish Nationalists made a careful selection from Irish tradition. They wanted a female symbol that would stand for Ireland and Irish women. She had to be chaste, virtuous, brave and loyal. They accepted James Clarence Mangan's Roisin Dubh or Dark Rosaleen. Kathleen Ni Houlihan and the Old Woman of Beare also in turn became well-known symbols for Ireland. The country was always represented as a woman. Men were willing to fight and die for this symbol. It was much harder for the women who were forced to carry the burden of this idealized status. The reality of everyday living was another matter entirely.

The Catholic Church in Ireland had been hardened by the puritan effects of Jansenism which had come to them through the priests who had escaped to France during the Cromwellian invasion of Ireland in the seventeenth century. It had conditioned its followers with a fierce hatred and fear of the body. The body must remain pure and unsullied because it was a tabernacle for the Holy Ghost, the Eucharist. O'Brien mentions the fact that the Spanish and Italians practiced a sunnier and happier type of Catholicism, (Woodward 51) perhaps because of the climate. I trace Ireland's colder variety to the influence of Jansenism,

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Victorian prudishness, and as Lee suggests, the economic interests of the farmers. I endeavor to show how O'Brien speaks for the "woman without a voice", the woman for whom authenticity is beyond reach, and I outline Edna O'Brien's fight against the deep-rooted Irish cultural traditions which contribute to this condition.

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CHAPTER ONE

" I am the lord thy God: thy shalt not have strange gods before me." (*Catechism* 26).

THE PAST

Feminist criticism of the works of Edna O'Brien has been mixed. While some praise her for her courage in revealing for the first time the unidealized sexual life of some Irish women, others are puzzled and somewhat irritated by her persistent use of passive heroines. Very few of the protagonists in her twelve novels show any real courage, spunk, or pluck. She shatters our expectations of the clever sensitive girl who has been stepped on long enough and is not going to stand for it any more. Her women rarely recover intact. These women considered "scandalous" by censors and clergy are actually stricken individuals whose illusions once dashed by men are left with no place of acceptance in society. They have been placed beyond the pale of power and respect and can no longer even envision happy resolutions with the men in their lives. They are the dispossessed, the displaced persons of O'Brien's fiction.

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I kept wondering why she continues to sing the same bitter song. why she doesn't snap out of it and write about something more pleasant. Nevertheless. I was oddly moved by the recurrence of such pluckless individuals and therefore felt compelled to consider why the author deliberately chose to virtually write the same story. with slight variations. over and over again. Why were these women such victims. and what had caused their collective predicament? The unifying principle in her work is not sex. as her detractors would have us believe. but loss, and a loss that goes much deeper than a neurotic response to one failed relationship. It would be easy to say that much of her work is autobiographical and therefore of limited appeal. But her life, as she has claimed in several interviews, is just the stepping off point for her fiction. As I reread her novels. I was more than ever convinced that Edna O'Brien has become the consummate recorder of what many women have lost, a sense of worth, a sense of power, and saddest of all, a sense of wholeness.

In order to examine the forces dominating her work, myths, religion, and Nationalism, I had to find archetypes of females who could dispel the blight of inferiority perpetrated on women by the

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Judeo-Christian tradition. I needed to find evidence of some authentic source of female strength that women could embrace as an emotional anchor. Historic records were of little value because as Thomas Carlyle proudly proclaimed in 1841, "The History of the World, I said already, was the Biography of Great Men" (Carlyle 17). I had to find from less biased sources a time when woman was considered more than the mere rib of a man.

Through the works of Merlin Stone, Manuela Dunn Mascetti, Anne Crilly, Margaret MacCurtain, Lorna Reynolds, Robert Graves, Joseph Campbell, Peter Berresford Ellis, R.J. Stewart and others I became familiar with the great goddesses and legendary women of the past. This research was a revelation in itself. I realized what Socrates failed to mention, that the examined life for women is extremely painful.

FEMALE DEITIES OF THE PRE-CHRISTIAN WORLD

Though we live in the age of Concorde jets and laptop computers, there is something in all of us, men and women alike, that makes us feel deeply connected with the past. For people

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raised and programmed on the patriarchal religions of today, religions that affect us in the most secular aspects of society, perhaps there remains a lingering, almost innate memory of sacred shrines and temples tended by priestesses who served in the religion of the original supreme deity. "In the beginning, people prayed to the Creatress of Life, the Mistress of Heaven. At the very dawn of religion, God was a woman"(Stone 1).

> According to the poet and mythologist Robert Graves: The whole of Neolithic Europe, to judge from the surviving artifacts and myths, had a remarkably homogenous system of religious ideas based on the many titled Mother Goddess, who was known in Syria and Libya... The Great Goddess was regarded as immortal, changeless, omnipotent; and the concept of fatherhood had not been introduced into religious thought (Graves 10).

Much the same religion that Graves discusses existed even earlier in the areas known as Iraq, Iran, India, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel (Palestine), Egypt, Sinai, Libya, Syria, Turkey, Greece and Italy, as well as on the large island cultures of Crete, Cyprus, Sicily and Sardinia. There were instances of similar worship in the Neolithic periods of Europe, which began at about

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3000 BC. The Tuatha De Danaan traced their origins back to a Goddess they brought with them to Ireland, long before the arrival of Roman culture (Stone 23-24).

The Tuatha de Danaan were the people of the Goddess Dana also known as Danu and Anu. In some texts she is described as mother of the Dagda, who is the father of the gods and the patron god of druidism. In other texts she is seen also as the Goddess Brigid and the daughter of the Dagda. Hills in County Kerry, the Paps of Anu, still bear her name.

Robert Graves in *The White Goddess* asserts that the connection between the early myths of the Hebrews, the Greeks, and the Celts is that all three groups were civilized by the same Aegean people whom they conquered and absorbed. Graves postulates that the popular appeal of modern Catholicism is, despite the patriarchal Trinity and all-male priesthood, based rather on the Aegean Mother-and-son religious tradition, to which it has slowly reverted, than to its Aramaean or Indo-European "warrior-god" elements. The first Greeks to invade Greece were the Achaians who broke into Thessaly about 1900 BC. They were patriarchal herdsmen who worshiped an Indo-European male

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trinity of gods. perhaps Mitra. Varuna, and Indra whom the Mitanni of Asia Minor still remembered in 1400 BC., subsequently called Zeus. Poseidon and Hades. Little by little the Achaians conquered the whole of Greece and tried to destroy the semi-matriarchal Bronze Age civilization that they found there. but later compromised with it, accepted matrilineal succession and enrolled themselves as sons of the variously named Great Goddess. Graves asserts that they became allies with the Pelasgians; they were seafarers who claimed to be born from the teeth of the cosmic snake Ophion whom the Great Goddess in her character of Eurynome had taken as her lover, thereby initiating the material creation. Ophion and Eurynome are Greek renderings of the original names. The Achaians may have called themselves Danaans after the same goddess in her character of Danae, who presided over agriculture. At any rate the Achaians who had occupied Argolis now also took the name of Danaans, and also became seafarers, while those who remained north of the isthmus of Corinth were known as Ionians, children of the Cow-goddess Io. The most warlike of the Pelasgians were the Centaurs of Magnesia. Their mother goddess in Greek was Leucothea, "the

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White Goddess," but the Centaurs themselves called her Ino or Plastene, and her rock-cut image is still shown near the ancient pinnacle-town of Tantalus. She had also become known as the "mother" of Melicertes, or Hercules Melkarth, the god of earlier semi-semitic invaders.

About the year 1250 BC a distinction arose between the Achaian Danaans and less civilized Achaians from North-Western Greece who founded a new patriarchal dynasty, repudiated the sovereignty of the Great Goddess, and instituted the familiar Olympian pantheon, ruled over by Zeus, in which the gods and goddesses were equally represented. Myths of Zeus's quarrels with his wife Hera (a name of the Great Goddess), with his brother Poseidon, and with Apollo of Delphi, suggests that the religious revolution was at first strongly resisted by the Danaans and Pelasgians.

Graves concludes how we may, without historical qualms, identify Danu of the Tuatha de Danaan, who were Bronze Age Pelasgians expelled from Greece in the middle of the second millennium, with the pre-Achaian Goddess Danae of Argos. Her power extended to Thessaly, and she mothered the early Achaian

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dynasty called the House of Perseus. By Homer's time, Danae was masculinized into Danaus, son of Belus (Graves 44-47). While contemporary historians may take issue with some of Graves' claims, he is relevant to the understanding of some of O'Brien's fiction.

THE CELTS

The Celts were the first transalpine people to emerge into recorded history. The term is a linguistic one which marked out members of the Goidelic "Q" Celts as Irish, Manx, and Scottish Gaelic speakers, and "P" Celts as Welsh, Cornish, and Breton speakers. The Gauls were Brythonic Celtic-speaking people and the term Gaulish may be applied to the language spoken by the Celts in all parts of the European mainland (Berresford Ellis 58). The name of the Gauls seems to have been derived from a Celtic word meaning "hidden people" perhaps because of their reluctance to commit their vast store of knowledge to records written in their own language. They believed firmly in the value of memory and the strength of the oral tradition. The reluctance to write things

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down was due to a taboo imposed by the druids rather than a lack of literary knowledge.

The Celts began an expansion around 900 BC at which time they possessed great skill in metal work and were known as the road-builders of the ancient world. Their roads were made of wood; later, the Romans simply built over the tops of these roads with stone. The Celts pushed southwards and at their greatest expansion in the third century BC had settled throughout Europe as far east as Galatia (around Ankara in Turkey). It is from this part of the world we have the earliest records of the workings of the Celtic state through to the British Isles which some scholars now believe were settled between 2000 and 1000 BC. The last major settlement was in the second century BC. Although Julius Caesar led two expeditions to Britain in 55 BC and in 54 BC, Britain remained independent from Rome until AD 43. Ireland was never conquered by Rome (59).

There is nothing written in Irish records about a Celtic creation myth, but this does not mean that they had none. Being a secretive people, they probably confined knowledge of it to the initiated, forbidding all lay speculation on the subject. Thanks

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largely to the scholarship of Christian monks, we have records of Irish mythical and legendary literature, but in their religious vigor it is reasonable to assume that some of the records were adjusted to accommodate Christian morality. Given these circumstances, it is incredible that so much of the pagan world remained in their texts. The literature falls into four main divisions. In chronological order they are: the Mythological Cycle, or Cycle of the Invasions; the Ultonian Cycle or Conorian Cycle; the Ossianic or Fenian Cycle; and a multitude of miscellaneous tales and legends which are hard to fit into any historical framework.

The Mythological Cycle comprise the following sections:

1. The coming of Partholan into Ireland.
2. The coming of Nemed into Ireland.
3. The coming of the Firbolgs into Ireland.
4. The invasion of the Tuatha de Danaan.
5. The invasion of the Milesians (Sons of Miled) from Spain, and their conquest of the People of Dana.

With the Milesians we begin to come into something resembling history. They represent, in Irish legend, the Celtic people from whom the ruling families of Ireland are supposed to

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be descended. Of the pre-Danaan settlers we know less and the accounts that are given of them are varied and conflicting (Rolleston 94-96).

GODDESSES AND LEGENDARY WOMEN OF IRELAND

Perhaps the most famous woman in Irish legend is Medb (Maeve) Queen of Connaght and often referred to as a triune goddess of sovereignty. (It is her story that Josie, the protagonist of O'Brien's *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994) tells on-the-run IRA member, McGreevy). Maeve's most famous adventure is related in the *Tain Bo Cuailgne* (The Cattle Raid of Cooley). Maeve, daughter of a High King, had several lovers and husbands. It is reported that she "never was without one man in the shadow of another." According to the myths and sagas she seems to have married Conchobar MacNessa, Tiride MacConnra Cas, Eochaidh Dala, and finally Ailill MacMata. Conchobar was king of Ulster; all the others were kings of Connaght. Some writers assert that Maeve represented the sovereignty of Connaght, and that no king was legitimate unless symbolically wed to the Goddess. The

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famous epic the *Tain* started when Maeve found that her possessions were not as extensive as Ailill's. The White-Horned Bull of Connaght had been born into Maeve's herd but had drifted into Ailill's herd as it thought it not seemly to be in the herd of a woman. Maeve heard about another bull, the famous Brown Bull of Cooley, and after attempts to secure it failed, she persuaded Ailill to help her lead an army into Ulster to obtain it. This developed not only into a battle of the bulls but also of the sexes. Ailill tried to devalue her as a person and reduce her status to a mere wife, a weak woman in need of a man's protection. Maeve reminded him that she had been the daughter of a king and the best of his six daughters. There were many men who wanted her and he was not the only pebble on the beach. Although Maeve fails to get her Brown Bull, Ailill also fails to keep the White Bull, and so the comic epic ends in a compromise. Maeve wants peace with the Ulstermen (Reynolds 13-14; Berresford Ellis 165-166). While this appears to be a familiar sovereignty story and is repeated in almost every text where Irish sagas are surveyed, nevertheless, it is still a target for male bias as Reynolds comments:

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> It was the result of Thomas Kinsella's words. "Following the rump of a misguiding woman." There is something very familiar in all this is there not? The woman denigrated, the woman asserting herself, and the woman blamed. It is Maeve's personality that is stamped on the story (Reynolds 14).

However, in Kinsella's defense, it should be added that he was merely repeating the tone and equilvalent diction of the *Tain.*

Another female of tremendous importance in Irish tradition is Brigid, Brigit (also associated with Minerva) a triune Goddess of healing, smiths, fire, fertility and poetry among other things. She appears to have been the daughter of the Dagda, and for a while was married to Bres, a half-Fomorii ruler of the Tuatha de Danaan. By Tuireann she had three sons, Brian, Iuchai, and Iucharba. In many tales she appears as an equivalent of Dana, Mother of all the Gods. She has her counterpart in Brythonic and Gaulish culture; she appears as Brigindo among the Gauls, and Brigantia in Britain. Her festival was one of the four great festivals of the Celtic world; a pastoral festival, it seems to have been connected with the coming into milk of the ewes. It was called Imbolic, or Imbolg, the pagan spring festival, and was held on February 1.

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The Goddess Brigid is often confused with the Christian Saint Brigid, also known as "Mary of the Gaels," who was born in Faughart in AD 450, and died in Kildare in AD 523. As an Irish saint she takes second place only to Patrick. In many accounts of her life her father is named as Dubhach, a druid. Soon after her death her cult became widespread. However, many ceremonies and traditions associated with the Goddess Brigid, were ascribed to her. Her feast day is also February 1. She was worshiped in a monastery at Kildare where a perpetual fire was kept burning, an observance undoubtedly derived from the perpetual fires of pagan temples, suggesting that the monastery was based upon a druidic sanctuary. No male was allowed to enter the sacred enclosure surrounded by a hedge. Thus a feature of the original Goddess which was fire was incorporated into the cult of Saint Brigid. To this day in Scottish Gaelic communities Bride, as she is known in Scotland, is remembered as the patron saint of the family hearth, where originally a peat fire was kept burning perpetually. Saint Brigid is also associated with a magical cow which was the totem animal of the Goddess Brigid (Berresford Ellis 50; Stewart, 93-101).

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Macha was also a triune goddess who appears in at least three distinct personalities. She is Morrigan, the Goddess of war, a personification of battle and slaughter, hovering over warriors and inspiring them with battle madness. Heads cut off in battle were known as Macha's acorn crop. In her Morrigan aspect she is said to have tried to seduce the great Ulster champion Cuchulain, and when he spurned her advances, she placed a *geis* (taboo) on him. When he broke the taboo, and was eventually defeated, she sat on his shoulder in the form of a crow.

Macha also emerges as the mysterious wife of Crunnuic MacAgnomain of Ulster. Crunnuic's wife had died and shortly thereafter a beautiful woman showed up on his doorstep. She took on the role of his wife and was soon pregnant. Crunnuic boasted to the King that his pregnant wife could run faster than the King's horses and chariot. The King ordered that the boast should be fulfilled. When Macha refused, the King then threatened to kill Crunnuic if she refused again. She raced against the King's horses, and as she reached the end of the field, she gave birth to twins. In one version of the story the place is named Emain Macha, or Macha's Twins. This became the seat of the kings of

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Ulster which features prominently in the Red Branch Cycle. Macha of the Long Tresses and daughter of Aedh Ruadh is also said to have built Emain Macha. She is listed as the seventy-sixth monarch of Ireland, reigning in 377 BC. Macha is said to have built the first hospital in Ireland, which was called Bron-Bherg (House of Sorrow) and was in use until its destruction in AD 22. While Macha's establishment is placed among the myths and sagas, it must be pointed out that Ancient Ireland did have an astonishingly advanced medical system which was carefully laid out in the Brehon Law Texts (Berresford Ellis 58).

Boann (Boand) whose name signifies "she of the white cattle" was a water-goddess and wife of Nechtan, a water-god. Sidhe Nectan (Kildare) had the sacred well of Conla, which was said to be the source of inspiration and knowledge. Only four persons were privileged to go there, Nechtan and his three cup bearers. Boann ridiculed this *geis*. She went to the well and walked contemptuously around it in a left-hand circle, whereupon the waters of the well rose up and pursued her and drowned her. Its course formed a river named after her, the Boyne. Most Irish myths have several versions, and this one is no exception.

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Eire or Erin was the Tuatha de Danaan Goddess who gave her name to Ireland. She was the wife of MacGreine, son of Ogma, and grandson of the Dagda. Her sisters were Banba and Fotla. When the Milesians landed in Ireland, Eire with her two sisters greeted them. However, Donn, the Milesian leader, did not treat Eire with respect, and a war ensued between the gods and the Milesians in which Donn perished. Amairgin, a Milesian druid, promised the Goddess that the country would bear her name. While the names of her sisters are sometimes used in poetic reference to Ireland, Eire still remains the Irish name for the country.

Fand, known as the Pearl of Beauty, was the goddess wife of the sea-god Manannan MacLir. She lived in Tir Tairnigiri (the Land of Promise). Once she quarreled with Manannan. During this period her Otherworld kingdom was attacked by three Fomorian kings. Fand sent for Cuchulain to protect her, and promised him her love, if he defeated her enemies. Cuchulain agreed, and after defeating her enemies became her lover. He lived with her for a month before returning to Ulster. Before he left, he made an assignation to meet Fand again on the strand by

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the yew tree. Emer, Cuchulain's wife, found out and was determined to kill her rival. They argued, and when Emer realized that Fand really loved Cuchulain, she offered to give him up thereby proving her own love. Manannan arrived and demanded that Fand choose between him and Cuchulain. Fand said, "In truth, neither of you is better or nobler than the other, but I will go with you, Manannan, for you have no other mate worthy of you, but Cuchulain has Emer." Manannan shook his cloak between Fand and Cuchulain to ensure that they would never see each other again, and Cuchulain and Emer were given draughts of forgetfulness by the druids (113).

Cuchulain again features in the lives of yet two more legendary women, the warrior sisters Scathach and Aoife. They were the daughters of Ard Greimne of Lethra. Scathach nUanaind or Buanand (Victory) was the most famous of female warriors and lived on Scathach's Island (Skye) and ran a military academy where many heroes of Ireland received their training in the martial arts. Her most famous pupil was Cuchulain. She taught him his famous battle leap, and also gave him the Gae-Bolg , the terrible spear (Reynolds 13; Berresford Ellis 206). Cuchulain trained with

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her for a year and a day during which time her daughter, Uatach, became his mistress. Later he joined her in an expedition against her sister, Aoife, also reputed to be a fierce female warrior. Cuchulain was able to defeat her only by using cunning. Later, she became his lover, and, after he left the Land of Shadows, she bore his son, Connlai, who later was inadvertently killed by Cuchulain.

There was another Aoife, the second daughter of Ailill of Aran. She married Lir, the Ocean God, and became a stepmother to her sister's children. Out of jealously, she turned the children into swans and doomed them to several hundred years of banishment. They were to spend three hundred years on Loch Darravagh (Westmeath); three hundred years on the Atlantic by the islands of Erris and Inisglory; and three hundred years on the Strait of Moyle (between Ireland and Scotland). According to the enchantment, when a southern princess married a northern prince, they would be released from the spell. When Bodb Dearg found out what Aoife had done he changed her into a demon of the air and no more was heard of her (Berresford Ellis, 32, 206).

Although several Ethnes appear in Irish mythology, perhaps the most interesting one is Ethne (Eithne), the daughter of Roc,

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steward of Aonghus Og, the love god. She was born at the same time as the sea-god Manannan MacLir took his daughter to be fostered by Aonghus Og. Ethne, who grew into a beautiful and gentle maiden, was given the task of being a handmaiden to Manannan's daughter. It was discovered that Ethne took no nourishment, neither food nor drink. On investigation Aonghus Og discovered that a Tuatha de Danaan chieftain had attempted to rape her while he was staying in Bruigh na Boinne and this had awoken in her a pure spirit and moral nature. She now existed as pure spirit. When Aonghus Og and Manannan Lir went on a voyage and returned with two enchanted cows whose milk never ran dry, Ethne lived on their milk.

One day she accompanied Manannan's daughter to the river Boyne to bathe. They became separated and Ethne found that she had lost her Veil of Invisibility which not only hid the Tuatha de Danaans from mortal gaze but gave them entrance into the world of immortality. She was unable to find her way back to Bruigh na Boinne. In this sad myth, the Christian scribes placed the birth of Ethne in the time of Eremon, the first Milesian king, they then made her encounter Saint Patrick, who gave her the rites of

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Christian baptism, and she became a pious Christian. One day she was praying in the little church by the Boyne when she heard a rushing sound in the air and innumerable voices, seeming to come from a great distance, which lamented and cried her name. It was her Tuatha de Danaan kindred searching for her in vain. She tried to reply but was overcome and fainted. When she came to, she was struck with a mortal sickness and Saint Patrick administered the last rites. He ordained that a church be named after her, Cill Ethne. The tale is a typical example of the Christianization of early myths by Christian scribes. However, the composition is done in such a way that it reveals the tenderness, almost regret, with which some early Christians in Ireland looked back on their lost world of pre-Christian tradition (110-111).

McCone reveals that there were at least ten known Saint Eithnes, many of which have roots in various manifestations of the identically named sovereignty goddess best known as Eithne Thaebfata. If so, he postulates, the christianization of sovereignty itself would seem to be implied here. The heroine's demise in such contexts is an obvious expression of her death to paganism and resurrection in Christianity (McCone 150-151).

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A survey of this nature would be incomplete without some mention of Deirdre, who was written about so frequently by the writers of the Irish Literary Renaissance, including Synge and Yeats. Deirdre (Derdriu) of the Sorrows was the daughter of Felim MacDall, a chief ten of Ulster. She was born when Felim was entertaining Conchobar MacNessa, the King, in his fortress. Cathbad the druid predicted that she would be the fairest of all the women in Ireland and would wed the King, but because of her, only death and ruin would come upon the land. Conchobar's warriors wanted the baby put to death at once, but Conchubar saved the child by saying that he would raise her and when she was old enough she would become his wife. In this manner no foreign monarch would wed her and so cause dissension in Ulster.

When the time came for her to wed the King, Deirdre did not want to marry an old man and put a *geis* on a handsome young warrior, Naoise, the son of Usna, a hero from the Red Branch. They fell in love, and accompanied by his brothers, Ainle and Ardan, Naoise eloped with Deirdre and they fled to Alba. Deirdre and Naoise lived happily in Alba for several years.

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The old King Conchobar pretended to forgive Naoise and Deirdre and sent Fergus MacRoth to invite them to return to Ulster in peace. Deirdre foresaw their doom, and pleaded with Naoise not to return, but at the urging of his brothers and Fergus he disregarded her warnings. The result, of course was disaster. Naoise and his brothers were slain, and Deirdre was forced to marry old King Conchubar. For a year she remained his unwilling wife, never smiling. Conchubar, angered at her attitude, told her she would be the wife of Naoise's slayer, Eoghan MacDuracht, for a year. While bound by ropes in Eoghan's chariot, she contrived to dash her head upon a rock which killed her. From her grave grew a pine tree, and from Naoise's grave a second pine grew. When full-grown, the two trees met and intertwined so nothing could part them. Their story was considered by the ancient bards as one of the "Three Sorrows of Storytelling" (Berresford Ellis 80-81).

Lorna Reynolds speculates on the imaginative pressure behind this story:

> From the same Red Branch Cycle comes Deirdre of the Sons of Usnach. I think here too we have as illustration of a change from one kind of society to another. Deirdre is in a position, at the beginning of the

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story. the very reverse of that obtaining in a matriarchal society. She has been chosen. preselected. reared in isolation. to be the future sexual partner of the King. Conchubar MacNessa. She is given no choice in the matter. no more than if she were a mare. or a hound. or any other chattel of the King's. But her character is not in accord with such a passive role. She is not fit subject for a sexual plaything and asserts her rights as a human being. to love and be loved. She is the leading figure in the drama. clearheaded. single-minded. decisive and brave as any young man. and ready to defy the King as none of them are. She put Naoise under *geisa* before he will run away with her to Scotland. Naoise is torn between two worlds. of service to the goddess and loyalty to the king. who now has all the power. The two worlds come into collision. and it is the new world of masculine 'solidarity' that wins. Deirdre does not want to return: her intuition tells her how dangerous it would be.

....

It is a love story-of course-a tragic love story (transition between one culture and another.) But there are other types of love stories that do not awaken quite such repercussions in the mind. Could it be, I ask myself, that the story of Deirdre and Naoise is a prototype? That love between the sexes of this romantic kind could emerge only in a society where women could be disposed of like chattels, and that the true lover could be seen as a deliverer from and protector against other men who would use women and wrong them in the most fundamental way? I suggested on

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another occasion, at Sligo in 1976, that Deirdre should not be regarded as an Andromeda figure, with Conchubar as the dragon and Naoise as Perseus. Deirdre dies with her love intact (Reynolds 14-15).

Cailleach Beara, the old woman, or Hag, of Beara (Beare), originally appeared as a triune goddess with her sisters Cailleach Bolus and Cailleach Corca Druibhne. She is also said to have been named Bui (yellow) and was also the wife of Lugh, the god of arts and crafts. The book of Lecan mentions that she had seven youthful periods, marrying seven husbands and having fifty foster-children who founded many tribes and nations. Her domain was the Beara peninsula on the Cork-Kerry border. There is also another Beara, the daughter of the King of Spain who married Eoghan Mor of Munster. Eoghan is said to have named the Beara peninsula after her (Berresford Ellis 51).

Hags play a conspicuous part in much of Irish literature. We find the Hag of Beare, the Hag of Battle, The Washer at the Ford, The Hag with the Money, The Hag in the Blanket, and later on the Hag who turns into a beautiful young woman, as revealed in Yeats's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (Reynolds 17). More recently, we find the Old Woman of the "Four Green Fields" which became a

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symbol of the four provinces of Ireland. This old woman represents Ireland still yearning for a united Ireland.

THE COMING OF CHRISTIANITY TO IRELAND

Much of Celtic custom in Ireland survived through the Reformation, Counter Reformation, the Great Famine, and even today, thinly disguised pagan practices are performed. But Druidism, the religion of the Celts, was assailed by the coming of Christianity to Ireland in 432, with the arrival of Patrick. As Ireland had never been part of the Roman Empire, it is only in the fifth century when written records begin to be kept that she starts to figure at all seriously in European history (Cruise O'Brien 26). In Irish history and legend (the two are often blurred) Patrick has been credited with three things: 1. The Christianization of Ireland; 2. Symbolic use of the shamrock; 3. Driving the snakes out of Ireland. Perhaps the most notable legend associated with Patrick's arrival is the often told story of the shamrock, which later became a symbol of Ireland, and still is. Patrick, to explain the mystery of the Christian Trinity to the ignorant pagans, was said to have

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looked down at the shamrock growing at his feet and declared "As there are three leaves on one stem, there are three divine persons in one god." Their ignorance of the Irish about a trinity seems questionable considering the prevalence in their own religion of several triple goddesses.

There are countless stories of former pagan gods. goddesses and heroes encountering Patrick and immediately being converted to Christianity. McCone asserts how the Church made the adoption of pagan deities possible:

> In Ireland, as in other parts of Christendom, a special version of the euhemerist line with considerable appeal was sanctification.... This made it possible for pagan deities or heroes and their desirable attributes to be appropriated by the Church through transformation into saints, rather as the very word noeb in Irish acquired the value "holy saint" in a specifically Christian sense (149).

Both Eithne and Brigid were eventually appropriated by the church and sanctified. O'Cathasaigh asserts:

> In spite of inferences by prominent Celticists--Myles Dillon, Nora Chadwick, and Proinsias MacCana-- that the Christian Brigid is the personification of a Celtic goddess, and research by the historian T.F. O'Rahilly that yields, not one, but two

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> Saint Patricks, the church has retained both Brigid and Patrick as "Calendar" saints. They are commemorated on February 1 and March 17 in Ireland and internationally. They are specially revered in rites at Irish holy wells, on mountain heights, and among ancient ruins. Brigid and Patrick survive partly because of a long-standing significance and partly because a matriarchal symbol and a druid saint cannot be readily dismissed.... To what extent is she [Brigid] the personification of a Celtic deity? A consideration of mythological sources and histories of lives of the saints and an examination of surviving Brigidine festivals and lore suggest a pagan-Christian syncretism (75-76).

The rise of the monasteries added enormously to the materials of Irish history. Except for the laws, Irish manuscripts were virtually nonexistent before the advent of Christianity. Monks worked assiduously to record the gospels and Christian dogma, but were also responsible for recording much of the Celtic oral tradition. Doubtless, much was laundered to suit Christian morality, but during the long transition period many of the monks still followed druidic customs. Several Christian monks continued to follow the style of the druids by cutting their hair in the mystic figure called *airbacc giunnae*, a tonsure which ran from ear to ear instead of the Roman circular form, which became a point of

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contention with Rome. Eventually, the Roman form displaced the Celtic form (Berresford Ellis 92). The Irish still clung to many of the old rituals. Celtic kings were legitimized only by a symbolic marriage with the goddess in her function of Mother Earth. In this manifestation she was referred to as the Sovereignty. During these rites the king received the cup of Sovereignty. Without this ritual his reign was considered impious, and animals and crops were adversely affected. The rites were officiated by the fili (seer) who was an offshoot of the druids. These practices continued until Elizabethan times (Cruise O'Brien 26-28).

The severest blow to women's status dealt by the arrival of Christianity in Ireland was unquestionably the Adam and Eve myth. The crippling effects of this myth on the psyches of women are still being felt. Woman was considered the temptress, the reason for Adam's fall, and the initiator of Original Sin. It is interesting to read the various accounts of Eve's yielding to the temptation of the serpent, and eating the forbidden fruit. It was no accident that a serpent was chosen to personify Satan. Stone reminds us that:

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> symbols such as serpents, sacred fruit trees and sexually tempting women who took advice from serpents may once have been understood by people of biblical times to symbolize the then familiar presence of the female deity. In the paradise myth, these images may have explained allegorically that listening to women who revered the goddess had once caused the expulsion of all humankind from the original home of bliss in Eden (198-199).

Several goddesses carried serpents as symbols of power and wisdom. Neumann's work contains photographs of sculptures illustrating this (56-62). The pagan Brigid was also associated with the serpent, and for a long time within the Celtic tradition the serpent was still respected as the following old Gaelic hymn suggests:

> Early on Bride's morn
> Shall the serpent come from the hole.
> I will not harm the serpent,
> Nor will the serpent harm me.

There are a number of images from the Pre-Christian Celtic culture of deities who clutch serpents, and the torcs which symbolize power and divinity are often serpentine (Stewart 98-99). When Patrick drove out the snakes, in actuality, this may have been a

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purging of the power of the Goddess, and the removal of every semblance of female power in Ireland.

As Christianity strengthened, so did the borrowing from pagan religion. McCone shows how some of the major emblems of kingship were relocated to the great monasteries. The crown of Brion, and the mantle of Loegaire were deposited in Armagh, while the tunic of Dunlang was transported to Kildare. They and the sovereignty embodied in them had been released from the pagan environment into proper Christian custody (152).

Celtic religion had honored women: women as well as men were druids. Druids were more than priests. They served several functions in society, and took up to twenty years to train. They were ministers of religion, important political figures, advisers, philosophers, natural scientists, judges, and teachers, and were able to give legal and military judgements (Berresford Ellis 90-92). Christianity changed all of that. Druids now were given unsavory and demonic reputations, since any religion other than Christianity was considered satanic.

Nevertheless, the initial evangelical nature of Irish Christianity deteriorated. Pagan customs and superstitions

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continued even among converts made by Patrick himself. Heron charts this decline:

> Then, in the monastic spirit, which from its start dominated the Irish Church, a leaven was introduced essentially at variance with New Testament Christianity, and which could not but work injuriously. Again, in spite of her independence, influences from without, and especially from Roman ecclesiasticism, told on the Irish Church; and Irish Christianity deteriorated — became less evangelical and more superstitious — in proportion as she came under Roman domination. One fact in particular is not to be overlooked. A consensus of testimony bears witness that in the sixth and seventh centuries there was a most serious decline in the religion of the Irish, that, in fact, such a relapse took place among the people generally to their old pagan ways, that some writers do not hesitate to call it apostasy (275).

The Welsh ecclesiastic Gildas relates that in the time of Ainmire, King of Ireland (568-571), almost all the people forsook the Christian faith, and that the king sent for Gildas to recover them. From that relapse Irish Christianity never seems to have properly recovered, considering the number of pagan observances which continue to this day among the native Irish (276). Heron

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judges as inferior the Christianity practiced in Ireland during the sixth and seventh centuries:

> Both monks and people came to be more than half pagan in their ideas and ways. Irish Christianity was in a very great degree paganism baptized, with saints in the place of gods. It would certainly not be much of an exaggeration to say that saints were druidical priests with a slight Christian varnish.
> Just as the Druids professed to possess preternatural powers, and by means of spells and incantations to work all sorts of wonders, similar miraculous feats without number are ascribed to the Irish saints in their Lives, written by the monks (276).

The monks were involved in power plays with the Ardri (high king) and were instrumental in the fall of Tara. Originally, public order and justice in Ireland depended on the central power. When King Diarmid sought to strengthen national unity by opposing the resistance of some provincial kings with conflicting interests, Guaire, one such king, killed Diarmid's officer, and was consequently subjected to Diarmid's wrath. Guaire was given refuge by the abbot Ruadan of Lorrha, but was seized by Diarmid. Riled by this clash of authority, Ruadan got all the great coarbs (heads of monasteries), and several discontented petty kings to join

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him, and demanded the surrender of Guaire. When Diarmid refused, Ruadan and a bishop took their bells and rang them loudly while cursing Tara, the King, and his army. They prayed that "no king or queen ever after should or could dwell in Tara, and that it would be waste forever, without court or palace, as it fell out accordingly." From that day the royal residence of Tara began to fall into decay, the kings had to live each in his own province, and the central kingly power was broken. Tara was blighted, and the national unity broken by the monks. What remained of Diarmid's power was finally shattered by another monk, Columba, who stirred up a rebellion, and with the help of his royal relations in the North defeated Diarmid at the battle of Cooldreevny (284-6). Monasticism flourished in Ireland for several centuries. The power of the Irish Church declined in the seventeenth century. When Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, and his Spanish allies were defeated at Kinsale in 1601, the great leader of Gaelic Ireland led the 'Flight of the Earls' in 1607, which sent O'Neill and some of his followers into exile on the Continent. "But what mattered was the symbolic image of the last great Gaelic chieftain joining the world of exiles" (Foster 44). The Old Irish aristocracy also found

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homes there. and several members of noble families who comprised the hierarchy of the Church were already in exile. Many of the bishops settled in Louvain.

As the monarchy changed hands in England. so did the power of the Catholic Church of Ireland. When England became a Protectorate under Oliver Cromwell in the seventeenth century. this posed an additional threat to Irish Catholicism. In 1642. Owen Roe O'Neill (Hugh O'Neill's nephew) returned from soldiering for the Spanish in the Netherlands to aid and assist the Rebellion in Ulster. Cromwell joined the parliamentarian side against Charles I. and clamored for the military suppression of the Irish Rebellion. In March 1642. he placed on the market for Protestant investors two and a half million Irish acres confiscable by reason of the rebellion. Land was to be taken out of all four provinces. Cromwell himself landed in Dublin in 1649. and in short order changed the face of Ireland (MacCurtain 1972. 140-153). MacCurtain relates how:

> Cromwell's campaign In Ireland was swift, terrible and decisive. O'Neill's death in November 1649, after the Sack of Drogheda removed the only commander who would have been a rallying point against Cromwell,

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> though Cromwell and his 3,000 Ironsides were formidable in their discipline, military experience and in the genius of the commander. Cromwell's campaign was technically an invasion and his army was an avenging one of the victorious Republic which had executed King Charles and was now intent on winning political and religious security throughout the state. A subdued Ireland was essential to the economic development of the Republic which looked westward to colonial extension (151-152).

The Cromwell invasion hurt the Catholic Church in Ireland. When Cromwell departed from Ireland in 1650, he left Ireton in command. By the summer of 1652, Ireland was reduced to the status of a conquered colony:

> During the Protectorate a penal situation had existed: priests were banished, religious houses closed and for a brief period imprisonment and death were the order of the day (169).

JANSENISM

The growth of Jansenism in the Irish Church further debased the status of women. After Cromwell's assault, many Irish clergy settled in France for a time, and it is during this period that there is some speculation that several were influenced by the work of

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Cornelis Jansen (Cornelius Jansenius) the bishop of Ypres in the Spanish Netherlands, who died of the plague in 1638, two years before his famous treatise *Augustinius* was published in 1640. This work, based on Augustinian asceticism, became instrumental in the establishment of Jansenism, a philosophy practiced for several years at Port -Royal, and spearheaded by Angelique de Sainte-Madeleine (formerly Jacqueline Arnauld), abbess of the convent of Port Royal of the Cistercian Order, located near Versailles. Angelique, dissatisfied with the growing laxity within her convent, broke with the Cistercians, cloistered her order, and selected Abbe de Saint-Cyran, a learned and devout theologian, and friend and devotee of Jansen, as her confessor. Together they sowed the seeds of religious controversy which prevailed for several years, and resulted in the imprisonment of Saint-Cyran by the powerful Cardinal Richelieu for a period of five years.

The Jansenists were devoted to a life of study, prayer, penance, self-denial, and withdrawal from the world. The physical pleasures of the world were held in contempt. The Jansenists promulgated the doctrine of efficacious grace and strict adherence to a rigorous penitential ethic (Sedgewick 37). They remained

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controversial, and were constantly at loggerheads with the Jesuits over the doctrine of contrition. Goldmann asserts, "The Jansenists adopted a tragic vision embodying a pessimistic view of human nature, a rejection of the world, and a conception of a "hidden" God — a God not readily acceptable (xii). Some of their practices were harsh and humiliating to women. Sedgewick cites one example:

> When Jean Callaghan a friend of Saint-Cyran's was appointed vicar of the parish at Cours-Cheverny near the town of Blois in 1651.... for striking a priest Callaghan forced a woman to kneel for three consecutive Sundays at the entrance of the church imploring forgiveness of God and of the parishioners attending mass. The Jesuits launched a campaign against Callaghan, thundered against dangerous heretical practices; the parish became so deeply divided over the quarrel that Callaghan was forced to abandon his parish in disgust two years later (55).

The Jansenists made Original Sin the focal point of Christian belief. By stressing the difficulty of salvation, which was only possible for the very few, they sowed the seeds of despair rather than hope in their followers (82). For women, the cause of Adam's sin, the result was permanent guilt, shame, and humility.

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Ranke-Heinemann explains the Augustinian outlook which permeated Jansenism:

> It was Augustine (354-430) who first promulgated the theory based on his interpretation of Genesis and Saint Paul that it was sexual intercourse between Adam and Eve that constituted original sin, and therefore every act of intercourse was not only in itself sinful but propagated sin through the very act of procreation (Ranke-Heinemann 75).

DeBeauvoir reveals how this extreme view of women has infected all of Western culture:

> Ultimately, Augustine and other Church Fathers pleaded for the so-called Josephite marriage: total continence in marriage. Such a marriage would insure all avoidance of pleasure as an occasion of mortal sin. Better yet, don't marry. In the eyes of the Church Fathers and ultimately the entire Church, celibacy is [regarded as] morally superior to marriage and sexual intercourse. Although not every Church Father and theologian took the Augustian view, it is this view that gets defined as orthodoxy (189).

Opposition to Jansenism grew, and at least five anti-Jansenist encyclicals were issued. Finally, in 1709, Louis XIV took drastic steps to erase all traces of its existence. He suppressed the convent, dispersed the nuns, and had the bodies of the more

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prominent nuns and *solitaires* moved elsewhere to prevent the erection of a shrine. The bones of the common nuns were hurled into a common grave, and the buildings at Port-Royal were eventually leveled in 1711 (Sedgewick 189).

When the Catholic clergy started filtering back into Ireland, it is difficult to document how much of the Jansenist and Augustinian philosophy they retained or promulgated. However, Carey defines the brand of Catholicism practiced in Ireland as Jansenist:

> The traditional belief pattern is Jansenistic, with a strong emphasis on the weakness of human nature and man's inability to act and think. With great distrust of human reason, God's grace is needed even more. Puritanism and fatalism tend to be the characteristic of this Catholic tradition (111).

It is significant to add, however, that well into the 1960s, some Irish priests in the confessional still sanctioned the "Josephite marriage" as the only acceptable form of birth control allowed.

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VICTORIANISM

After the Great Famine the Irish were psychologically and spiritually defeated. Their feelings of utter inferiority and vulnerability were so enormous that many of them began to imitate and embrace British customs. Dublin was soon described as a "shabby London." Some Irish became more British than the British themselves. Moreover, with Ireland firmly entrenched as an English colony, it is inevitable that the repressive Victorian attitudes toward women and sexuality would spill over into Irish society. Victoria's long reign (1837-1901) endorsed such customs as the concealment of all female limbs. (As recently as the 1960s remnants of this obsessive modesty prevailed in Ireland when brides were pressured to wear long-sleeved wedding gowns, because female elbows should not be exposed in Church.) This was carried to the ridiculous when Victorian furniture legs were also considered indecent unless covered. Lady Gough's *Book of Etiquette* offers this advice to library owners: "Don't place the books by married male authors next to those of female authors and vice versa" (Hendrickson 340). Mme. Celart's advice typifies

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Victorian society's expectations of young ladies:

> It is not in good taste for a woman to speak with too much animation or too loudly. When she is seated she must never cross her legs.... She must present herself as that creature made to please, to love, to seek support, that being who is inferior to man and who approaches the angels (Olafson Hellerstein 97).

Prudery reigned in Ireland, England, and indeed in much of Europe.

THE FARMERS

Lee sees the economic conditions of post-Famine life as far more influential in separating the sexes than Victorianism or religious philosophy. He describes it as an economic necessity fostered by the farmers to protect their interests. The Great Famine of the 1840s drastically weakened the position of women in Irish society. As late as 1841, women accounted for more than half the total non-agricultural labor force. The Famine helped change the situation in several ways. It delivered a crippling blow to domestic industry. The numbers of spinners of wool, cotton,

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and linen fell by 75% between 1841 and 1851 (Lee 37). The main source of independent income enjoyed by women all but vanished. Farmers shifted from tillage to livestock. As agriculture became less labor-intensive, women were less necessary around the farm. In dairying, where they remained important, they were gradually superseded as milk came to be sent directly to the creameries for processing.

Domestic service became the only major employment left for women, except in the North. By 1926, 60% of the women employed outside of agriculture were engaged as domestic servants. The proportion of agricultural laborers to farmers, and of smaller farmers to stronger farmers, fell sharply. This alone helped to tilt the balance of economic power within the family in the male direction. Knowledge of cooking beyond the potato became necessary, and with the spread of ranges and stoves, Irish women for the first time found themselves working longer hours in the kitchen. This loss of women's economic independence made her much more vulnerable to male economic dominance. It also affected the marriage prospects of single women, and helps explain the growing importance of the dowry after the Famine. The

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relative independence that some women enjoyed before the Famine diminished. The marriage rate fell. Despite the fact that many women emigrated. by 1926. 25% of women over the age of forty-five remained unmarried. compared with 10% before the Famine (38). Men married younger women. and as the age gap widened. this tended to increase the authority of the husband. Marriage might be a sacrament. but for the farmer it was a commercial transaction. and it devalued the family currency to put two daughters on the marriage market. Lee reveals in no uncertain terms the economic imperative behind the separation of the sexes:

> It was therefore crucial to maintain the economic dominance of the new order that all thoughts of marriage in Ireland should be banished from the minds of the majority of Irish youth. Temptation must not be placed in their way. Sex. therefore, must be denounced as a satanic snare: in even what had been its most innocent Pre-Famine manifestations sex had posed a far more subversive threat than the landlord to the security and status of the family. Boys and girls must be kept apart at all costs (39).

The rise of the strong farmer coincided with the growth of clerical power. Priests were drawn disproportionately from the class of tenant farmers. and shared their attitudes. In 1840, there

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was one Catholic priest to about 3.500 lay people. In 1960. there was one to every 600. The proportion of nuns grew even faster. from one in 7000 in 1841. to one in 400 in 1941. As the Church grew stronger. the image of virginal women and the new public obsession with sex gained ascendancy. Lee continues:

> It is one of the ironies of the intellectual history of modern Ireland that at a period when Catholic propagandists lovingingly portrayed everybody as out-of-step except our Paddy. and when they were prone to denounce England as decadent. they imbibed unconsciously. as their Protestant brothers did more consciously. the prudish values of Victorian middle class morality. which simultaneously idealised and repressed women. Pre-Famine Ireland was renowned for its chastity. but prudery was conspicuously absent. As the Irish language declined. and Gaelic values were eroded, prudery seeped through Irish society and came close to being equated with morality itself (40).

Most young girls were convent educated, and it was during this period that the cult of the Virgin Mary became powerful. She became the ideal model for women, and her characteristics of purity, obedience, docility, and resignation were heartily endorsed by a male providence. The desexualization of women in general

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had its counterpart in the depersonalization of nuns in particular (42), and little acknowledgment was given to tireless work of religious sisters in the fields of education, nursing, and scholarship. Only recently has a modicum of acknowledgment been granted to the contributions of these "invisible women."

WOMEN'S ROLE

In the Middle Ages, women's role in society and religion changed radically with the coming of Christianity. If they embraced this new faith, they were no longer included as essential parts of the Church hierarchy. They could take the secondary positions as nuns, and indeed some of the abbesses (notably the Abbess of Kildare) were very influential, but as part of the governing structure of the Church they were excluded. While the influence of women did ebb and flow during different historical periods, it was usually in the capacity of loyal subservient mother, producer of potential Church members, and keeper of the home. Church and society were now primarily patriarchal, and have remained so.

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The law, society, and the Church all conspired to keep women "in their place," and women who failed to recognize that place were dealt with severely. Women could not hold property according to the law. After the Industrial Revolution, when they were less necessary for the various tasks of spinning, weaving, or dairying on farms, there were few opportunities for them to find occupations. Single women of the agricultural class were employed mostly as domestic servants. Even women of the upper middle classes had difficulty earning a living if their fathers died.

Marriage was the only solution for many women. Unmarried women, of both classes, who had no means of support were often encouraged to enter convents or emigrate.

Some chilling statistics are suggested by the admission records of St. Patrick's Hospital, Dublin, the largest mental hospital in Ireland, which was erected in 1757, with money provided under the will of Jonathan Swift. Malcolm poignantly points out the plight of many upper middle-class single women of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century who were wrongfully placed in lunatic asylums, especially by brothers who, following the death of a father, no longer felt obligated to support

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unmarried sisters (326-8). So far, a survey has yet to be done on the admissions to public mental institutions.

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NOTABLE EXCEPTIONS

Given the circumstances under which most women lived, it is little wonder that the history of few strong-willed independent Irish women emerges. In fact, the numbers recorded could be counted on the fingers of one hand. This does not of course suggest that such women did not exist, only that male historians did not consider the contributions of women of sufficient importance to record. The film maker Pat Murphy insists that several women achieved remarkable things, but went unrecognized. She claims that women's political beliefs and work were constantly devalued. Her film, *Anne Devlin,* is an effort to remedy this (*Mother Ireland* 1988).

The history of women was not taken seriously in Ireland until the 1970s, when Margaret MacCurtain pioneered the history of women's education. The publication of *Women in Irish Society: the Historical Dimension,* in 1978, was a landmark in the writing of women's history in Ireland. For the first time, established academic historians were writing and discussing the impact of women on Irish society in the past. The paucity of source material

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made the task difficult. The destruction of the Irish National Archives in 1922 added to the problem (MacCurtain and O'Dowd 3). Nevertheless, the lives of a few exceptional Irish women are recorded. I will briefly summarize some of them.

Grainne O'Malley, the pirate queen, from Galway who lived during the late sixteenth century is one notable exception. Several romantic novels were written about her, but, despite the legend, much of her activities remains shrouded in obscurity. O'Flaherty contends that she has been portrayed as an Irish Amazon, a Diana of the Atlantic or as a candidate for nationalist sainthood.

Following her death in 1603, the exploits of O'Malley passed into local legend, and later, with the subsequent accretion of myth, as Granuaile she became identified with Ireland's struggle for freedom against 'all the might of England' (Appleby 53-58).

During the eighteenth century a growing number of women disguised themselves as males in order to follow an unconventional career. Anne Bonny, another pirate, whose life seemed to follow the career of the archetypal female warrior, is one more example of female courage and daring, who disguised herself as a sailor and went to sea (63). According to Daniel

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Defoe's account. Anne Bonny was an illegitimate child born near Cork, who was brought up as a boy to conceal her background and identity. She subsequently emigrated to Carolina, where she met the pirate Rackham and eventually fell in love with him and eloped. When Rackham was captured, Mary Read (another disguised woman pirate), and Anne Bonny took over. When both women were eventually convicted of piracy at a court in Jamaica in 1720, Bonny was reprieved on the grounds that she was pregnant (63-64).

Ireland is replete with material, both historical and literary, recounting the contributions made to Irish history by two indomitable women who became thoroughly involved with Irish cultural, political and social concerns during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: Maud Gonne (1866-1953), and Constance Gore-Booth (1868-1927). In many ways their backgrounds and inclinations were similar. Both were beautiful educated women from upper-class families. They were both artistic in nature. Both were presented at court, Maude at Dublin Castle to Prince Edward, and Constance at Buckingham Palace to Queen Victoria. It was expected that both women would marry suitable partners from

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their own circles, and join the superficial life of polite society. Both women, however, opted for lives of more substance.

Born in Aldershot, England, Maud Gonne was the daughter of British army officer, Colonial Thomas Gonne and his English wife. They moved to Ireland and settled for a time in Dublin. As Mrs.Gonne died when Maud was four, and her sister Kathleen two, the girls joined their father near military headquarters at the Curragh. They spent some of their childhood on the Hill of Howth where Maud was exposed to Irish history, and tales of the country's long struggle against English rule. Although her later travels took her to England and France where she settled for several years, she remained interested in Ireland's problems. She threw her enormous energies into Ireland's welfare.

Maude met John O'Leary of the Fenians (who introduced her to William Butler Yeats), Douglas Hyde of the Gaelic League, James Connolly of the Labor Movement, and Arthur Griffith founder of *The United Irishman*, which advocated self-government for Ireland, and first used the words Sinn Fein (Ourselves Alone) as the rallying cry for Irish independence (Ni Eireamhoin 7-14).

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Appalled by the countless evictions. Maud's first significant work in Ireland was for the Land League on behalf of displaced tenants. She traveled to Donegal and witnessed several of these evictions. She helped the Land League raise money to build small huts to accommodate those evicted. She joined Connolly to investigate conditions in Mayo in 1897. when again the potato crop failed. When people began to die of starvation. recalling the Great Famine of the 1840s. she spent months in Mayo and Donegal caring for the sick and arranging for school meals for children. Her work for Irish causes has become legendary (21).

Her long association with Yeats has been well documented. and needs little elaboration here. She appeared in the title role of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan.* a play he had written specially for her. He proposed to her several times. and she became the subject of many of his poems. some written in love. some in anguish. and some in rancor. He reluctantly accepted her rejections, and some of his pain is reflected in his poem "The Folly of Being Comforted" which appeared in *The Speaker* (1902):

> Heart cries, 'No,
> I have not a crumb of comfort, not a grain,
> Time can but make her beauty over again:

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> Because of that great nobleness of hers
> The fire that stirs about her. when she stirs.
> Burns but more clearly. O she had not these ways
> When all the wild summer was in her gaze.`
>
> O heart! O heart! If she'd but turn her head.
> You'd know the folly of being comforted.
> (Yeats 78).

When she married Major John MacBride in Paris in 1903. Yeats was deeply shocked and hurt. but he remained her friend for many years. and came to her aid on several occasions. Maud Gonne was imprisoned twice. and was forbidden by the British authorities to travel to Ireland. because of her reputation for inciting protest. She disguised herself as a fat old women. deceived the train and boat officials. and managed to arrive in Dublin. Again she threw her energies into helping the prisoners who were interned after the Easter Rebellion.

In 1937, under Fianna Fail (the anti-Treaty party), the Free State enacted a new Constitution declaring Ireland a sovereign independent state. In 1948, Sean MacBride (Maud's son) became Minister of External Affairs. For the rest of her life Maud Gonne continued to agitate for prison reform. In later years, she was

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visited by poets, historians, writers and artists. She managed to outlive most of her valued old friends. Yeats died at the age of seventy-three in 1939. She lived to be eighty-six. Maud Gonne died in April, 1953, and was buried in Glasnevin (Ni Eireamhoin 15-43).

Constance Gore-Booth, another dynamo of same period, fought on all fronts for women's rights, social justice, the plight of the poor, and the Nationalist cause. Like Maud Gonne she had been born into relative comfort. Constance was born in Lissadell House, County Sligo to Sir Henry and Lady Gore-Booth. She was the eldest of five children. Spurning the social life of Dublin society, she persuaded her parents to let her study art in Paris. There she met Polish nobleman, Count Casimir Markievicz, a widower with a small son. They were married in London in 1900, and their daughter, Maeve, was born in November 1901. They were both artists, and decided to settle in Dublin. Here Constance applied her energies to social problems.

She came under Griffith's influence, and joined the Sinn Fein Movement. She was acutely disturbed by the plight of Dublin's poor, and worked to alleviate some of their misery. She

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moved in much the same circles as Maud Gonne MacBride, and both women were united in their extensive efforts on behalf of prisoners and their dependents. Constance, however, was much more militant than Maud. Markievicz contributed to *Bean na hEireann*, and designed its title page, a woman symbolizing Ireland standing against a rising sun. She advised Irish women to take an active part in national life, and in the fight for an Ireland independent of Britain.

She joined Connolly's Citizen Army, and Pearse and MacNeill's Irish Volunteers. Both groups, together with the Irish Republican Brotherhood, prepared for the Rising of 1916. Constance Markievicz was deeply involved in what she considered the three main groups in Ireland: 1. The National Struggle; 2. The Women's Movement, and 3. The Cause of Labor (*Mother Ireland* 1988). In 1916 the National Struggle took precedence. Constance was second in command to Michael Mallin of a section of the Citizen's Army. They commandeered the College of Surgeons, and she was the only woman to fight as a soldier in the actual military operation. Markievicz held her position, and did not even know that Pearse and Connolly's group at the Post Office had

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finally surrendered on Easter Saturday. She was informed on Sunday, and could not believe it. When most of the leaders were shot, her death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. She was taken to Mountjoy jail, and later sent to Aylesbury, England. When world opinion turned against England's brutal treatment of the rebel leaders, Markievicz was discharged and returned to Ireland, after having served thirteen months in prison.

Again and again Constance Markievicz involved herself with Irish independence. She was imprisoned several times. While still in prison she was elected Sinn Fein candidate for Saint Patrick's division of South Dublin. She was the first woman ever to be elected to the British Parliament. Constance Markievicz continued to work on behalf of the poor, and particularly for prison reform until her death in 1927. She too is buried in Glasnevin (47-78).

EFFECTS OF NATIONALISM ON WOMEN

Nationalism reveals many faces in Ireland, and becomes an abstract term rather than a specific one. It can represent, depending on the organization flying its banner, cultural, social,

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political. literary. religious. or revolutionary change for the common good of the Irish people. Condemnation by the Church. and support by the Church confuses the issue. The Catholic hierarchy. for the most part. sided with Vatican policies. which was generally antinationalist. while local clergy were often nationalist. There are times when Church goals are synonymous with nationalist goals: there are times when the two are at loggerheads. They are not always easily separated.

In the late eighteenth century. a nonsectarian movement the United Irishmen pushed nationalism to the left with their republican ideals from revolutionary France. However. Catholic and nationalist agitation on a countrywide basis did not occur until the early nineteenth century when Daniel O'Connell led the fight for Catholic emancipation. The Catholic Association which was created around this national cause became one of the first mass movements in Europe (Carey 113). A political party machine was created with active help from the clergy, emancipation was granted, and the results of these cooperative efforts were evident.

Already other groups with different viewpoints were emerging. The Young Irelanders, who also supported O'Connell,

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believed religion a matter of conscience, and supported plans for nonsectarian colleges, but the Archbishop of Tuam openly condemned the "godless" institutions because they provided education for Irishmen of all religious persuasions. Another tenet of The Fenian Brotherhood, the separation of church and state, caused conflict with the Church (114).

In the late nineteenth century, Irish nationalism focused politically on Home Rule. Charles Stewart Parnell, leader of the Parliamentary Party, had success for Home Rule for Ireland almost within his grasp, when the scandal over his relationship with Katherine O'Shea was spread by the press. It was not a new story by any means, as they had been together for several years, and had three children. But it now became a political football. The Church attacked Parnell fiercely for violating the puritanical norms it had carefully established for women (115). The fact that Parnell was not Catholic, and Mrs. O'Shea's marriage had ended in fact years before, made little difference. The O'Shea divorce scandal ruined Parnell. Home Rule was dead in the water, as was Parnell's political power.

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Around the same time period a brand of romantic nationalism blossomed glorifying Irish culture, language, and tradition. Douglas Hyde's Gaelic League promoted Irish language and literature. Lady Gregory, William Butler Yeats, and Edward Martyn were involved in writing for and organizing the Irish Literary Theatre. They promoted the peasant tradition and the old Celtic mythical tradition. Ardent Catholics with a messianic vision, Pearse, Thomas McDonagh, and Joseph Plunkett were Irish-language enthusiasts, poets and revolutionaries who preached sacrifice for Ireland.

All of these forces joined in the idealization and repression of women. The eighteenth century poets writing in Irish had promoted images of Ireland as both a beautiful woman subjected to the tyranny of imperialism, and as the old woman who waited for her children to secure freedom. Both images depicted Ireland, and, by inference, Irish women, as images of subjection needing male protection. For the most part, women themselves accepted idealized status, and at times contributed to it. Constance Markievicz' illustration for *Bean na hEireann* is one example, and Maud Gonne's portrayal of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* another.

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Unreal expectations for women were frequently espoused, and it became difficult to differentiate between the symbol and the flesh and blood woman. Theoretically, women were placed on pedestals, the subjects of men's romantic visions. Realistically, they were the victims of male dominance, and afforded little voice, except in affairs of the home.

As several pictures still illustrate the Virgin Mary was considered the Queen of Ireland, a difficult model for a mother with children to emulate. Anything that threatened to besmirch the unsullied reputation of Mother Ireland or the women of Ireland (the two were often synonymous in the fertile male imagination) was suspect, and open to public ridicule. Synge and O'Casey were to find that out later when their plays treating women realistically were attacked. The demands on women from both Catholicism and nationalism combined to confine Irish women to rigid behaviors and conventions.

For a short period under Cumann na mBan (women's branch of the Volunteers) it seemed that women had gained a new militancy. Women fully expected to participate in the Easter Rising of 1916. Sighle Humphries, herself a member of Cumann

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na mBan, relates how the women were mobilized, armed, and ready to fight side by side with the men, but at the last minute were refused permission by DeValera. She recalls their anger at being ignored by the exclusionary tactics of the male leaders (*Mother Ireland* 1988).

Women were given the vote in 1918, and also expected full participation in the newly formed Dail Eireann. This was part of what they had fought for. But only Constance Markiewicz, and the widows of executed leaders were even considered. The Fianna Fail's 1937 Constitution put the final nail in the coffin of female political power in Ireland. Written into article 41.2 of the Constitution we find women's place permanently assigned:

> In particular the State recognizes by her life within the home, woman gives the state support without which the common good cannot be achieved.... The state shall, therefore, endeavor to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties at home (Robinson 61).

Another article of the same Constitution placed for the first time a prohibition on divorce law. Contraceptives were banned. The Censorship of Publications Act of 1929 had placed a ban on books

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or periodicals "advocating the unnatural prevention of conception." The fact that few female voices were heard to protest these misogynistic policies can be explained easily enough. Most of the strong female figures, including Constance Markievicz, had died, or were on the losing Republican side, and as Robinson reminds us:

> The fact is that these measures were processed through the filters of a completely male-dominated Parliament and commented on by a completely male-dominated media (62).

THE COMMON MARKET

Women, however did make some progress in the field of education, and were entering convents and universities in larger numbers. But it was not until the 1970s with entry in the Common Market that conditions for women began to change radically. An important part of the European Community's Social Action Programme was full equality between the sexes in the member states. Pressure from the Community finally forced the Irish government to finally assign women Civil Service workers equal

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pay with men. The government tried to postpone the implementation of the Anti-Discrimination (Pay) Act of 1974 by requesting an Amendment Bill. The Commission formally refused the Irish request by a Decision on April 14, 1976 (66).

There were changes for women in other areas also. While abortion remained illegal, contraceptives were made available, and divorce was at least legal, if still not condoned by the Church. Finally, many women resisted the images assigned to them by men, took responsibility for their own lives, and refused to wait for patriarchal consent. According to journalist, Nell McCafferty:

> The facts of the current modern Irish woman are: She is on the pill; she is sexually free; she is demanding work outside the home; she is controlling and spacing the number of her children within marriage; she is walking away from marriage when it is bad; she doesn't even necessarily consider marriage a condition of motherhood. There has been a massive sea change in the social attitudes and perceptions of Irish women since 1970. Absolutely massive! It does not reflect in the official literature, or the official laws. They still control us. The holy men, and the political men are trying desperately to keep the other image alive— that of the Rose of Tralee, the Irish colleen, and the Virgin Mary. But the reality, as we know, is completely different.... If I had to select an image of

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> women for Ireland. it would be Sheela-na-gig. the little fertility figure still seen on the walls of old churches and ruins (*Mother Ireland* 1988).

In recent years. women's groups have formed. and become more eloquent in public affairs. But much remains to be done before women can be said to have true equality with men in Ireland.

Edna O'Brien's work deals primarily with the oppression of women during the fifties and sixties. Her female protagonists. her so-called scandalous women. reflect the accumulated layers of repression inherited from all the forces mentioned. They crumble under the burden of these restraints. and occasionally flout the conventions. For this reason her books were banned in Ireland for many years. With changing attitudes, they are now easily available. and cause few raised eyebrows.

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CHAPTER TWO

The bird would cease to be as other birds
But that he knows in singing not to sing.
The question that he frames in all but words
Is what to make of a diminished thing.
(Frost. "The Oven Bird" 46).

THE SHACKLED SPIRIT

A PAGAN PLACE

Nothing that was worthy in the primordial past really departs. no truth or goodness realized by the feminine spirit ever completely dies: it goes underground waiting to surface in moments of quiet and not so quiet desperation in the forms of myths. images. symbols. nature. and in the archetypes of the collective unconscious. The ragged ladies of much of O'Brien's fiction are in search of spiritual autonomy; they are ragged, because their emotional and spiritual lives are in tatters leaving them in a perpetual state of disconnectedness. They are the blind leading the blind. Few of her female protagonists live fully realized lives; they live marginally in a hostile world, cut off from their true spiritual core, clinging to shards of suppressed hope to

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shore up the fragments of their existence. Documenting the forces working for and against feminine authenticity becomes the central concern of O'Brien's work, and the waking and growth of woman's consciousness the desired result.

Caitlin (Kate) Brady, the sensitive and intense protagonist of *Country Girls* returns home to her Irish village with her friend Baba after both have been expelled from convent school. Kate lives in absolute terror of her father's wrath and her mother's cold disapproval. Paralyzed with fear, she makes an important disclosure:

> I had been looking at primrose leaves for seventeen years, and I had never noticed before that their leaves were hairy and old and wrinkled. Always on the brink of trouble I look at something, like a tree or a flower or an old shoe, to keep me from palpitating (107).

Here there are no prayers of desperation, muttered Hail Mary's for divine intervention, no promises of novenas to the Virgin, no supplications to Saint Jude, patron of hopeless cases, no frantic appeals to the conventional instruments of comfort provided by the Catholicism she had relied upon previously to sustain her in hours of crisis. Now it is to pagan nature she turns and acknowledges its

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healing effects on her psyche. But the struggle is far from over as we observe in several of O'Brien's works the same psychological battle waged by female protagonists between the myths and symbols of Roman Catholicism, and those of paganism which are rooted in nature.

The tensions between the inculcated doctrines of the Church, and the intuititive psychic energy generated by pagan attitudes toward nature are typified particularly by three protagonists: The unnamed child, adolescent narrator of *Pagan Place*, Anna, the middle-aged divorced wife of *The High Road*, and Josie, the hermetic old widow of *House of Splendid Isolation*.

In *Pagan Place* the young narrator, a high-strung and sensitive Catholic school girl struggles constantly with the terrors of her life. She observes with sharp accuracy the tensions and contradictions which surround the deceptively simple landscape of the west of Ireland. She lives with her older sister, the beautiful Emma, her troubled martyr-like mother, and her brutal drunkard of a father. The narrator says little, but registers all. Her initial fear is that her mother might die before her, "You did not want her to die" (30), and her frantic prayers are a plea to God that her father

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will not kill her mother. Preoccupied with impending domestic disaster, she mutters conventional prayers from her Roman Catholic training, and "suffers little stings to be devout"(9). Fear rules the child's world as she is overwhelmed by the thought of losing her mother, who had once threatened suicide: the child bargains with God:

> As I lay me down to sleep
> I pray to God my soul to keep
> And if I die before I wake
> I pray to God my soul to take (30).

A little later in the novel, when the narrator arrives from school to witness one of the frequent domestic quarrels, her anxiety rises as she grasps for external comfort, to calm her internal terror:

> When you got home there was a row in full swing. She was frying rashers and the fat had water in it because there was spitting and hissing in the pan. She sent you upstairs for her apron. You hated going up, didn't know what you might meet, Miss Davitt for one thing. She told you where to find her apron and you put your hand in and felt for it on the back door but it wasn't there. You had to go in. You prayed.

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> Oh sacred heart of Jesus.
> I place all my trust in you.
> Mother of God remember me.
> St. Anthony pray for us (64).

Again. the external conflict in the home. and the superstitious belief in ghosts (Miss Davitt has recently committed suicide) is partially allayed by muttered ejaculations.

But the forces of myth. paganism and nature also operate on the psyche of the child. and pull against the ties of Catholicism. Like Kate in *Country Girls Trilogy*. the narrator of *A Pagan Place* is a child of nature. and the landscape of County Clare is steeped in pagan history. It stimulates a combination of fear. fascination. and genuine wonder in the narrator as she observes her journey to school:

> In the morning on the way to school. you saw things. tracks. fur, feathers, and once a paw with its long nails intact. You skirted the fort of dark trees. It was a pagan place and circular. Druids had their rites there long before your mother and father his mother and father or her mother and father or anyone you'd ever heard tell of. But Mr. Wattle said that was not all, said he had seen a lady ungirdled there one night after physicking a donkey. The ground inside was shifty, a swamp where lilies bloomed. They were called bog

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> lilies. The donkey went in there to die and no wonder because the shelter was ample. No one would go in to bury it. It decomposed. The smell grew worse and worse and more and more rampant. The dogs carried the members around, the bits, big bones and little bones, and they were scattered everywhere and in the end were as brown and as odorless as twigs (10-11).

The conflict between Catholicism and paganism is further acknowledged in the people's attitudes to certain plants. The young girl has learnt from her mother that roses were lovely because they were connected with St. Theresa (34). However, the hawthorn that grew wild in the hedges was unlucky to bring in the house. This flower is associated with the old goddess culture, and legends about the hawthorn still survive (Reynolds 12). Although neither mother nor daughter know the myths behind the flower, nor its symbolic significance, enough has survived of the old culture to make it necessary to avoid tempting fate by bringing it indoors. The child sees the world through her mother's philosophy of sacrifice, and tries to emulate it. She thinks of God as an accountant who keeps tabs on all his children. When the narrator grazes her knee, she offers up her discomfort. "That was a good thing because you suffered and God would note that suffering and

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put it toward easing her predicament." When Mother and daughter flee the father's drunken abuse by taking refuge in a field, the mother prays for the safety of the house, but the child has more immediate concerns. "You were afraid of Druids. You had things to fear from the living and the dead." The house is made safe again by the arrival of the priest who "shook holy water from his thurible all over furniture and things, but didn't bless the people" (36). The child is intrigued by the ritual, but registers the priest's emphasis on objects rather than people.

The narrator's imagination is both stirred and stimulated by the mysteries of the Church, ancient myths, and the fascination with nature. With an artist's eye she relates that "The periwinkles were the color of hen dirt" (43); and her Aunt Bride's puff "was mauve and threadbare like a tongue" (44). In long streams of consciousness her young impressionable mind flits from subject to subject interweaving the multiple influences assailing it, all grist for the imaginative mill. The local pub owner has won admiration and fame for his discovery of a collar of gold which he uncovered in a field while hunting rabbits, reminding them of the myth of Malachi and his famous collar of gold. In the same sequence, the

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narrator refers to a lake "named after Red Eye, a king so generous that he gave his eye away and when he did, a lake bled from the socket." However she notes the discrepancy between the myth and reality as she adds: "It was not red though but gray like the sky itself" (45).

While religion is uppermost in people's mind, history, politics, and Nationalism are always lurking in the background. The young girl's father had once been on the run from the Black and Tans and had stayed several days in a potato pit. He later had rheumatism because of the incident, and was proud of the fact that the rebels had burned the "big house" to the ground rather than leave it for the British soldiers to turn into a barracks. Her aunt's husband had been killed by the British, and she still sang "The Croppy Boy" in the kitchen while her father quizzed her on Daniel O'Connell and his greatest achievement. The girl rattles off, "Seventeen seventy-five and Catholic Emancipation." Her mother was interested in neither history nor politics, but had a definite passion for "pictures of Spanish ladies in tiered skirts and pictures of Christ" (47). When "Your Aunt and mother kissed and you thought of Mary Magdalene and her sister Martha and how one

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was a sinner, and then you thought of you and Emma." The narrator notes that there are vast differences between the sisters. Her sister Emma has moved to Dublin and is living a fast-paced unsupervised life compared to the narrator. The local schoolteacher Miss Davitt who had been steeped in Nationalism and Irish myth becomes mentally disturbed and praises the Greek and Latin languages but belittles her students for settling "for a puny alien tongue." She goes on a rampage flinging copybooks in all directions. She said she was already dead and had composed her epitaph, which read:

> Hail life, sweetness and hope and the sooner the better.
> To thee do we cry poor banished children of Lir,
> Heaven, Hell, and shingles, Ulster, Munster, Leinster,
> and Connaught, asses and gennets when the cat is away
> the mouse can play and the Red Branch Knights
> doffing their pants in a quiet watered room (53).

The mixture of myth, religion and history in the teacher's ravings are internalized by the narrator who stands in awe at the spectacle. While other students are laughing at the teacher's outlandish performance, the narrator is disturbed and afraid. It is in the babbling of the teacher that we see the confusion below the

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surface. This is a society that has embraced a new system of beliefs while an ancient system was never quite forgotten. The raving Miss Davitt claims they are children of the mythical "Lir" and not the Christian children of "Eve." This same confusion haunts the young girl as she struggles to embrace a philosophy that will suit her temperament. She is surrounded by mixed messages and tries to separate authenticity from indoctrination without yet being ready to recognize which is which.

It is only in nature that the girl is fully alive, embracing life. Beyond the pull of history and dogma she romps in the freedom of nature's bosom.

> You ran the first part. Your chest piped. You slowed down. The grass was warm. The cropped grass was like a carpet. The high stalks danced and waved. You danced with them. You touched them. That was your way of saying hello. Yellow flowers predominated. Yellow flowers were your favorites, the warm bells and the warm discs. The dandelions were bowed down with seed. You consulted one to know the time. The bits of fluff went in all directions, parachuted, then dropped, adding to that crop. A weed with very thin tendrils got itself entwined in sturdier things. You broke some to make bracelets (54).

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It is in this environment that her spirit soars free of restraints. When she reenters the confines of home and repression, a different person emerges.

When her sister Emma becomes pregnant, the narrator sees the discrepancy between espoused Christian doctrine, and the practice of Christian charity. On Emma's trip home from Dublin she is scrutinized. "Things are known before they happen" (112). The entire affair is discussed in whispers and innuendos. When Emma is cross-examined and admits to the pregnancy, her father devises a code to enable her to communicate with her family when the child is born. If she has a boy it will be described as a Volkswagen, if a girl, a Hillman Minx (152).

The local postmistress is the village gossip, and despite all the secrecy, the village is abuzz with the scandal. It even spills over into the narrator's school life, where she dreads returning to listen to the wagging tongues as if she were responsible for her sister's sin:

> You had missed three days from school in a row. You wanted never to have to go back to school. You prayed that you might get consumption, or scarlet fever, or inherit a legacy and employ a tutor. There would be

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> nudging about Emma. No girl would link you or have a stroll with you at playtime. You would be ostracized (144).

In sheer desperation the narrator discovers balm for her bruised soul in nature:

> In the cut hay there were white flowers, meadowsweet and buttercups that hadn't yet died and hadn't yet withered. The hay was green. They cut it too soon because the man with the machine came and they had no choice. It would sweat and have a sour taste but the cows and horses would munch it, relish it, nevertheless. They were not fussy.
>
> You lay on the ground. Your nose got tickled. The world was empty. The world was deserted. You didn't hear a dog or you didn't hear a bell, you heard nothing only your heart hammering. You contrived the rolls, so that you went from one green swarth to the next, skipping the grass in between, getting wet, getting intoxicated (148).

But the spirit's respite is temporary as the problem of Emma's pregnancy looms near. Her mother attacks Emma's belongings, and is so humiliated by the loss of respect which followed her daughter's moral lapse that she and the narrator hide from Lizzie, a gutsy friend who tries to show her that

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disappointment is not necessarily catastrophe. Lizzie's efforts are met with a total reluctance to face facts or the villagers:

> Lizzie yelled up. and said attention please. She had used her hand as a loud speaker because her voice was both loud and more muffled. She said if she were mine I'd walk her through the town and hold my head high. and then there was a deathly silence while she must have been stepping over the grass and getting across the paling wire because there was no further announcement and you were on tenterhooks until she was far enough down the avenue to be sighted.
>
> She moved like a harrier. Your mother remarked on it. on the caper of her. Your mother said another candidate for the lunatic asylum and without too long an interval either. Emma concurred (121).

Neither the mother nor Emma could even entertain Lizzie's suggestion. Life in this so called Christian society had made it impossible to accept or forgive the mistakes of a wayward girl. The townspeople are so indoctrinated by the prevailing mores that it never even occurs to them to notice the lack of charity. Appearances are everything; Lizzie has to be a lunatic to suggest otherwise.

Yet the mother has no qualms about begging her friend the doctor for an abortion on Emma. Her father also, who had gone on

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a rampage and flailed the living daylights out of Emma when he finally discovered her condition blaming his wife for it. too pleads with the doctor. "Your father said he wanted something done and pronto at that." It was a "little matter of circumventing nature." When the doctor claimed it was against his "professional ethics." "Your father said to ethic his arse and play ball and do something" (132). The doctor quotes the fifth commandment. "Thou shalt not kill." But Biblical quotes are of little practical value to a family facing loss of face in the village. The value of good reputation and neighborly respect are not to be underestimated. The narrator in terror at the chaos this collision between doctrine and desperation has produced in her own spirit. sees death as the only solution:

> You couldn't accept it. It needed a squeal or a pram to remind you of a baby. Her death would have simplified everything then. It was the only solution. It was what you all wanted. her death and her burial (132).

Later. the narrator sees her sister as a scandalous woman and devises penance and redemption for her:

> She looked scandalous. The hooks and eyes of her skirt wide open. You invented penances for her, for her face to be covered in sweat, her hair streaming, her walking

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> on a bed of nails. going to the altar with an agnus dei. a lamb of God. prostrating herself. getting cleansed. getting forgiven. eventually getting canonized (132).

The young girl can envision reconciliation with the Church and eventual sainthood as the only alternative to death. When the abortion is not to be had. and the father of Emma's child is not to held accountable because he is unknown (even to Emma). she is shuffled off to Dublin to live in seclusion until the baby's birth. There is no offer to permit her to stay at home under the care of her parents. Charity must not interfere with respectability. The shame is too much for them to tolerate. A confused narrator internalizes this attitude. but she is not quite ready to acknowledge the hypocrisy it exemplifies. She struggles to make sense of the contradictions which surround her. In her effort to escape confusion she reads poetry. Her spirit tries to find a solace religion no longer offers:

> You read a poem called The Hound of Heaven, how a hound of heaven pursued the soul. You could picture the hound running round and round, tracking this soul, this Emma, fleeing it down the days and down the arches of the years (136).

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Thompson's poem is no comfort. As yet, she does not realize it is her own soul that is being pursued, not Emma's.

The soul is still very much on the narrator's mind as she visits her friend Della, who is dying of tuberculosis. The girls talk of movie stars and religion. As Della's condition deteriorates, the visits grow less frequent. The narrator intuits Della's death:

> Passing Della's house there were lights in each of the four windows and it was like Christmas Eve but you knew in your bones that Della had died then, although you did not know it officially ... She [Della] was holding a crucifix in her hand, holding it tight, like she was clenching it. You thought it funny that her will should be dead but her grasp alive, and you wondered if her soul had got there, if it had been told of its abode for all eternity. It took some time for the soul to make the journey and no one knew exactly how long it took. She had been dead for twenty-four hours (143).

A later trip to Dublin with the infant's arrival perpetuates the confusion in the narrator's mind. She is hearing bits and pieces of guarded conversation which only baffle her further. There is never any frank discussion of the problem. Her mother had bought no baby clothes because it was arranged that the baby would be handed over to the State a few seconds after it was born.

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As Emma's confinement ends, the narrator's fears increase. She has an extreme reaction to what she does not fully comprehend. Her lack of biological knowledge allows her imagination to feed her terrors. Like Kate in *Girls in Their Married Bliss* she is terrified of the physical aspects of pregnancy:

> You were consumed with the nightmare of Emma's belly. You thought you saw it move. You couldn't be sure but that it was one of her muscles or if there had been any movement at all other than a phantom one in your mind.
>
> In the train lavatory everything got blurred. Black rings started to appear. They twinkled black. They moved into your brain, whole batches of them. Once they got in there they started swimming and merging together. They made a whirring noise like the spokes of a bicycle. They occupied your whole head. They were colliding. You fainted, but without anyone knowing. Not even you yourself knew (154).

Whether from the remnants of Victorian prudery or residues of Jansenism, fear of the body remains a concern for the narrator. As her young body begins to develop she was "promoted to a brassiere."

> The cups were too deep. She said to wear it outside your vest and you did, though that completely nullified its use. Your diddies were hardly formed. You got

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> stinging pains in them from time to time. You discussed those pains with no one. You couldn't touch your diddies, not even with your own finger, and you couldn't touch your nipples either. The nipples were like warts only they were pink in color, whereas warts were flesh colored and later brown when they withered away after caustic pencil had been applied to them. Hers were big and floppidy. They were agile (158).

The young girl is even squeamish about looking at her mother dressing. "You did not look at her directly but you saw the details of her person out of the corner of her eye."

When Emma's child finally arrives it has a blood defect. It is kept in an oxygen tent for several weeks and her mother is not allowed to see it. The mother leaves, and on a return visit some months later discovers Emma has moved away. The narrator and her mother trek through Dublin trying to find her. They punctuate the search with trips to every church they pass and pray for her return. They spend three days looking for her. Exposure to the city holds little charm for the narrator who misses her "ordinary dull things like crushed stone in a field" (167). The girl is distanced from nature and it takes its toll on her psyche:

> The stars were not nearly so bright in the city,

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> not nearly so singular. Between you and them there was a pall, a pall generated by soot and smoke (166).

In this prudish environment the facts of life are never explained to the young girl, but her mind registers furtive sexual activity even when she does not quite understand its significance. While staying in a rooming house as they search for Emma, the narrator says the rosary with her mother:

> Once after she had fallen off to sleep, you heard panting from the next room, the amateur actor's room. It was like something you had heard before, distantly, a footprint on your mind, you didn't know from where. He panted even though he was alone and it sent a kind of shiver through you and you prayed to God that you would never be alone in the city with no one to turn to at night (169-170).

When her mother decides to call on Father Scanlon to help locate Emma, they both have to endure his invective. Among other things, he reminded them that "Emma had gone the wrong way as well as the road to perdition. A libertine he called her" (170). When they finally locate Emma's new abode they leave a message for her. She writes to her mother:

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> Emma's reply was in a brown business envelope and marked personal. It said that she had just gone through hell with a neo-Victorian confinement and the loss of her child.... She would tell Emma to come to heel, to come down off her high horse, to uncross the Rubicon (172).

There is little true affection expressed between mother and daughter, and the mother is more concerned about her daughter's whereabouts than her welfare. When the narrator goes alone to meet her sister, she is astounded at how quickly Emma has bounced back to life again. She is once more with her fast living friends and the narrator who does not share Emma's resilience has become a little afraid of the change in her sister:

> Her eyes, her cheekbones, the set of her mouth, everything about her was more defined. They might have been done with a chisel. She had a smile. She had a secret. It was sewn into her. When she laughed it was brittle (176).

When the narrator reports back to her mother, she softens the blow and neglects to tell her of Emma's new hardness, saying that she needs to recuperate.

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Back home in their village the mother makes no further reference to Emma and her child. "It would never be mentioned again; it would never be referred to by name" (180). With the family catastrophe now over, the narrator is still intrigued by sin and the effects of punishment on the soul. Even as she lies in bed on a cold country night and endeavors to heat her freezing feet with a hot water bottle she associates the heat of the bottle with hell:

> The stone bottle was too hot. You pushed it towards the rungs of the bed and every so often you stretched so that your feet had the benefit of it but when it suddenly got unbearable you took your feet away. You realized that in hell you would have no such choice and the fire would be all around you, the tongues of flame touching every part of you, every zone and the devils would be all around you stoking it and hell and the sleeping towns and the jog-jog and the tongues of flame battled in your mind as you descended into sleep (182-3).

Even during adolescence the narrator remains a frightened and naive girl. The family tries to return to normal. Nature, which had always provided a wealth of freedom to her shackled spirit, now for the first time takes on an ominous appearance:

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> The trees were very stark with their characteristics showing, their knots and their tumors and their branches and their twigs like prongs, out to afflict (186).

This threat is extended with the arrival of an American male cousin, who exposes his bare chest to the narrator as a playful tease. The sight of his body so repels the girl that she bolts in horror to escape in her beloved fields. But again nature threatens:

> You ran out the door and down the fields and past the fort and through the lily swamp to the callows. You saw the dark coming but that did not deter you. You kept running away, away from the house, where he was packing to leave. The light went under the trees. Under the trees began to be vast dimensionless places. It was the worst light, because of being creepy, because of being over-suggestive. The dark rose in spines around the trees and the bushes and the new telegraph pole and they distinguishable as tall shapes in a thicket of deeper dark (190).

The narrator is paralyzed with fear when no one answers her calls for help. Her vivid imagination makes her plight unbearable as she tries to flee from the internal and external demons that appear to pursue her:

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> It was a mistake to yell. a cardinal error. you only drew attention to your plight. You couldn't move. Your legs were going under you. Your legs were liquid. were like snot. You couldn't retrace that long terrible vicious route again. You couldn't move. You had to.... It did not matter that you got thorns in your flesh. anyhow it was unavoidable (191).

Again nature has become an escape for the protagonist. if not always a positive one. Peggy O'Brien (no relation) comments on Edna O'Brien's penchant for using nature and its effects on her characters:

> The act of projecting feeling unto nature and describing the composite scene which results serve a healthier purpose than escape. It affirms a human vitality manifested by creative power (Peggy O'Brien. 480).

The narrator's ordeal continues until she sees the kitchen lights in the distance. and struggles home in a state of hysterics. Her mother tends her wounds, but dismisses the whole episode very lightly. The impressionable narrator then takes to walking in her sleep. When she is taken to the doctor, he tells her she has worms. The teacher tells her she is just too highly strung.

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The narrator not able to really confide her fears to anyone who will take them seriously begins to frequent the chapel. In a daring move she goes inside the altar rails. "No woman was supposed to do that." In her new religious intensity she begins to have visions:

> You had a vision. You were with Jesus on a mountain road and he wore a white robe and was performing miracles easily. You were his assistant, you were carrying his equipment (194).

It is while in this religious phase that she meets a young priest home on holiday after five years in the tropics. "Everyone was struck on him. One woman had swooned" (194). The young priest is very taken with the narrator and she becomes his guide around the village. She is delighted when he seeks her out to be his assistant. They are friendly for several weeks and go around visiting the villagers. Eventually, he takes the narrator on a tour of a houseboat. She is both afraid and excited. She has a crush on him. When he finally molests her and then masturbates, she feels the ambivalence of repulsion and honor. Her anticipation of the encounter is soon replaced by terror once more:

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> Never had the corneas of the eyes bulged so. He opened his buttons, wrenched them open and presented himself and said to touch it. It was grotesque. The flesh all around it painted and raw. He said to touch it. You touched it on the snout. Your touch was fearful. You begged him to stop. You expelled his finger. He tried to part your knees, to prise them open, said it was lonely for him, it would be unfriendly but you were petrified and would not yield (204).

The narrator then has to witness the priest's masturbation. Her mind records every detail. The romantic scene she had envisioned had been transformed into a scene of shame for both. "It was like the sweet flowers between the pages of a book that had become putrid" (205).

When the girl returns home her parents are waiting for her. Hilda, another woman who had designs on the priest herself had informed on them. "And hell hath no music like a woman playing second fiddle" (207). Her mother turned purple and looked on the point of a seizure, while her father took over the interrogation and started to clout her about the face. He then struck her with a ruler several times and booted her bottom. When the girl races upstairs, he pursues her to her bedroom where he keeps beating her until

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the girl has an orgasm. and does not know what happened to her. The narrator is seduced and flayed on the same day. She is exploited by the priest. and is punished by her father for *her* sin. The priest. Father Declan. by contrast. is quietly transferred.

As things calm down again in her home. the narrator enters into a new period of mortification. "The thing you had to be was fervent. and more fervent. and most fervent." She looks for a creature in nature to emulate:

> You consulted creatures as to what you should do. asked frogs their opinion. Frogs had learned the knack of being stealthy. Frogs had very good camouflage. were the color of the surroundings. a greeny brown (213).

Finally. her communion with nature returns again and the spirit is temporarily released from its cage:

> The flutter of the leaves brought on your trance. Hundreds of thousands of sycamore trees all obeying the same wind, their wide green palms opening then tightening, letting in and keeping out the light. Changing the prospect from indoor to outdoor to indoor, forever altering. It was the most lonesome hour just before dusk with all the colors going, all the streamers, the pinks and reds, the violets and indigos, and blues, the lovely laneways of vanishing light. It

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> was weepy time. You said Hip Hip Hooray. That was your giveaway (216).

However. the escape in nature is short-lived as the breach with her mother widens. She struggles to find a role model she can now follow. Her mother and Emma no longer satisfy. A visiting nun hunting up new recruits for the foreign missions visits the school and is impressed by the narrator's reverence. She counsels the girl about the prospects of entering the order. The narrator begins to consider the idea. "The radiance that was hers would be yours" (225). When the news of her possible vocation reaches the town the narrator is redeemed in their eyes:

> Going through the town you were waylaid by people. shopkeepers who had shunned and slighted you. It was as if you had already entered. so shy and respectful were they. It was like winning a trophy. You refused the various offers of tea and lemonade, the tactics so as to delay you. to stop you in your tracks. Girls tagged along to partake of your glory and asked if you would send them scapulars and medals and things (222).

Unable to resist the intoxication of this newfound celebrity, the narrator agrees to enter the convent. The family has been reinstated in the hearts of all the good respectable people.

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Only the Nigger, their handyman, has the foresight to estimate the sacrifice. He said, "You were only a young nipper and there was no knowing how you might turn out, that you might become a Follies girl" (231). She has one last look at nature and what she must leave:

> The barley stooks were in huddles in the fields, the wind trapped within them. There were five stooks to every huddle, the heads bunched together, the hinds splayed out so to achieve the balance. It was through these splayed ends that the winds entered and made a channel upwards. They were well done and none had fallen. They had been done by Manny Parker's men...You were saying goodbye to fields and to trees, and even to headlands of fields where the plow never got and where not an ear of barley had chanced to grow....You felt a terrible burden as if something inanimate might speak or something motionless might get up and move (231-2).

And so the narrator departs for a convent in Brussels. She has made her choice for the wrong reasons. She takes with her no real religious vocation. But even this weak flight from one cage to another seems more charged with possibility than remaining in what had become a life of hypocrisy and repression. The real

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tragedy here is there is no way of unshackling her true spirit within the confines of her small Irish village with all its rigid rules of behavior. The novel reads like the saga of one extended dysfunctional family destined to remain in denial. A fully realized life for a young girl under these conditions is virtually impossible. The convent becomes a mere refuge, an effort to bury the soul if not the head in sand.

THE HIGH ROAD

The High Road (1988) marks O'Brien's return to the novel after an absence of eleven years during which time she wrote several volumes of short stories. The setting of this novel is no longer the Irish countryside but somewhere in Spain. Anna the middle aged protagonist has gone to Spain to recuperate from a painful relationship. She is Irish by birth, so many of the childhood hangups suffered by the narrator of *A Pagan Place* plague her still. She has been living in London and has toured America lecturing on the Irish past. This protagonist while older and more experienced than the child of the former novel is cowering still

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from life and is not really any closer to genuine authenticity. She remains repressed and full of fears and is still in search of spiritual comfort. She seeks temporary relief in woman's last resort -- she has been reduced to shopping. It is Easter Sunday but religion is not on her mind. She needs escape and resurrection of a different kind:

> The insect-like hands on the black digital clock told me the worst, that it was only five; hours before the shops opened, and that maybe being Easter Sunday, they might not open at all. In them somehow rested my refuge. I imagined cowering there all day, allowing time to pass and knew now that I was sadly mistaken in coming (2).

As Anna sits in her room she notices a photograph on the whitewashed wall. "Somewhere in her limbs and the recesses of her frightened being she was trying to find the pluck and resolution to get up and dance, to bedazzle an unseen audience" (2). The photograph becomes an appropriate metaphor for Anna's spiritual paralysis. Anna is unable to swim, dance or sing — all expressions of the liberated spirit.

She meets up with D'Arcy, a glib but cynical painter and expatriate. We learn much later in the novel that he is also an

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"unfrocked priest." Both are Irish born, and a kinship develops. It is D'arcy's drunken escapades that provide the necessary levity in the novel. He offers her an early warning about the deceptive serenity of the setting:

> The village looked idyllic, blond drowsing houses clustered together, their tiled roofs shelving one above the other to give the effect of a sprawling fortress. The church, as her said, was the seat of an Iberian moon goddess long before the fishermen — with their transubstantiation gigs — got their clutches on the needy (5).

The Spanish countryside proves to have much in common with that of Ireland. There are religious parallels also. While Christianity had suppressed the pagan culture, many of the old customs survive as we learn later in the novel. From the early chapters we see the tension between the old pagan nature religion and the Christian Church which has submerged but never quite supplanted it. This tension also echoes within Anna:

> Where the path came on to the main road there was a Station of the Cross on the gabled wall of a house. That would be my landmark on my way home. It was the fourth Station — 'Jesus meets his afflicted mother'. Flashing on the little torch, I took a closer look at it to

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> recognize it later. The Virgin was in pale blue, as was the other Mary who had succumbed to an orgy of tears. Both in blue togas, both supplicating (18).

As Anna continues her first walk through the village her curiosity is stimulated. Some instinctive force leads her in another direction.

> Then on a whim I followed a second hill, following the Stations of the Cross which I knew would lead me in the end to the church, the seat of the Iberian moon goddess. The figures in the Stations became more and more stooped, with the imminence of sacrifice (19).

The gossiping village women, like the Furies, loom in the background suspicious of Anna, much like the gossips who pervade the Irish village in *A Pagan Place*. Anna is both drawn to them and repelled by them at the same time. They are part of her heritage as a woman, and part of her problem. They engender old hurts and resentments, a reminder of the unlived, unfulfilled lives of many women:

> They were older women with sallow faces, faces of stone; impassive, except that in the eyes there was a message which was hard, outraged and unforgiving. The years and their hardships had made them look alike, and they all wore black. Some had walking

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> canes. while others limped and all had grey hair ridiculously rinsed with blue and were primly permed. I felt daunted. yet at the same time I followed them. as if drawn to them in a kind of surrender. They were calling me to their camp. to their way of life. to a repentance and a contriteness that I was not ready for. not yet. I stared back at them and in staring I believed that I was defying my own mother who had pervaded and begrudged every moment of my sleeping and waking life. persisting even after death. In their eyes. as in hers. were uncharted vortexes of hurt and rage that I believed went back to their own mothers and their mothers' mothers. figures who had usurped their lives from them (19).

Here Anna acknowledges women's complicity in their own predicament. They too have aided and abetted the strangulation of the feminine spirit. They too have perpetuated the loss of female authenticity. They too have accepted and condoned that diminished thing.

Anna drifts on still trying to make connections. In the church she sits in the back unable to pray, yet unable to leave. "In some secret recess of my being I wanted to link with them, a soft look, an exoneration maybe" (20). As she listens to the drones of the litany to the Virgin, and observes a statue of "the Immaculata,

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ascending to the clouds. crushing the serpent rather demurely with her bound plastered feet" she can stand it no longer. She psychologically rejects the women and all they represent. which to Anna is loss of spiritual vitality. She leaves the church furtively. "In the end I skulked out and crossed through the gateway into the graveyard. which by comparison was cheerful. glowing with life." Once more in nature away from the trappings of custom and organized religion Anna connects with the universal mother. She deserts "mater purissima" (from the litany) for Mother Nature:

> It was growing dark. The sea relinquished its blues. its greens and its violets and was now like a great. dark. recumbent. wet mother; mother of creatures. animate and half-animate. mother of life and death. moon and star. mother of the unknown; indifferent to the wretched pleas or cries of man (20).

Anna drifts through life in the Spanish village meeting several shallow or wounded people, most of whom seem to be on the run from something whether it is church, country, culture, ex-spouses, lovers, parents, obligations or life itself. None of them live fulfilled lives. After several encounters with Iris, Wanda, Portia, D'Arcy,

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and assorted sycophants. Anna is close to suicide. She has come to find herself, and is forced to confront an empty shell.

In chapter five of the novel we find a despondent Anna contemplating her final escape:

> Yes I did have them, a bottle of sleeping capsules that I had carried for so long, just in case. It seemed unbelievably absurd that these capsules made in some factory in Switzerland, the grains carefully poured into one half of the capsule, then sealed with the other half, had the potency to permit me to take my own life. A mad thought came to me of how they refuse suicides a Christian burial and I felt disappointed that I would not be allowed in the little graveyard behind the church, which I liked so much (43-44).

In the throes of spiritual despair Anna is saved from extinction by the appearance of Catalina, a beautiful young maid in the hotel. Catalina is all that Anna is not. She is a free spirit who enters Anna's life bearing flowers. Anna observes her and her own desire for life returns. "I could not do it, not then, she had by her sudden arrival hauled me back" (45). Catalina has helped restore not only Anna's physical life but, more important, her spiritual one as well. Slowly they develop a loving relationship. Anna is

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transformed. Nature is embraced again. and for a short time all is right with the world:

> The flowers. strewn about the table. looked as if they had landed there in some primordial storm. There were roses. red. pink. and white: sweetpeas like wet jewels. anemones with black startling centres. and flutes of lilies. pale. waxen. saintly. They all smelt of water. as obviously they had all been sprinkled at the market. There was something infinitely sweet and harmless about them and I thought how could anyone not want to remain alive. in a world where such tender things exist (48).

However. soon Anna's past failed love affair returns to haunt her. and she regrets her emotional dependency on men. In a impulsive moment she courageously discards her lover's letters the contents of which had caused her considerable psychic pain. She shreds them and throws them in the water, only to retrieve them in panic minutes later. Her feeble attempt to relinquish the past is short lived:

> The awful truth was, that though I wanted to throw them away I did not sufficiently want to throw them away and retrieving them was a solace in itself. I put

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> the wet matted pieces back in my pocket. castigating myself. and headed homewards (56).

Back in the abyss of emotional turmoil Anna awaits deliverance. She hopes that her lover will somehow track her down and save her from ruin. On the edge of sadness Anna again receives flowers from Catalina:

> My room was in semi-darkness and yet I could see the flowers. feel them as if they were breathing. It was a fresh bunch. so beautiful. so immense that I knelt before it as at an altar. Opening the shutters. I saw there were sweetpea — airy rampant. glorious: she had included every color. red. deep purple. pale purple. pink, and white. They were in such profusion. it was as if they had not been plucked from their high, thin, curving stalks. but that they had grown like that, in a shoal. She had added sprigs of myrtle. its pungent smell an echo of the forest. in contrast to the soft airy smell of the flowers.
>
> I hurried out of the room to thank her, buoyed now with some purpose (57).

As Anna continues to drift aimlessly on the periphery of life she mingles with the other village guests hoping for a sense of belonging that never happens. More and more she begins to think about Catalina. There is no real relationship between them yet

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except for the flowers. Anna becomes increasingly enamored of her:

> Yet for me. to know that she was there. to know that she existed was a consolation in itself. In the evenings when I had a drink or two I would allow myself to think of her. as I might a painting or a beautiful garden. I would dwell on her body the way I never allowed myself to dwell on my own. exploring it with invisible hands. invisible eyes. touching her tentatively without shame (77).

Briefly. within the confines of her imagination. Anna shuffles off the restraints of Victorian and Jansenist prudery. The female body. even if not her own. is now considered a thing of beauty to be celebrated not mourned. This is the beginning of psychological progress for Anna.

By chapter nine of the novel we begin to get a closer look at Catalina. No longer the shadowy character in the background who supplies flowers to Anna at crucial moments, Catalina's spirit begins to reveal itself. Unlike the other vapid females with whom Anna acquaints herself, Catalina is not materialistic. When Anna wishes to buy her a gift the offer is refused:

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> She put her hand on the belt of her jeans and said she had no liking for finery. All that was for other women, but not for her. She would hate herself if she were seduced by such things.... She would never leave the land, it was in her blood, it was in her veins (81-82).

As the relationship between Anna and Catalina develops we recognize the profound influence the young girl's zest for life has on the protagonist. Anna, embarrassed by her inability to swim, rejects Catalina's enticements to plunge into the water. "I won't," I said, too embarrassed to tell her I couldn't swim" (108). Catalina loved the sea, enjoyed its mystery and the freedom it offered the body. For Anna it holds great terror, the fear of letting go. The same holds true for dancing. Anna watches Catalina dance and envies the girl's spontaneity:

> Suddenly and without deliberation she put her arms out, as if weaving through water, and then she started to dance, a lazy dance moving not just to the music, but to some inner sway.... She made me dance with her and carried away by her own boldness she led us out of the cloakroom into the long corridor with floor-length windows that opened to the garden. I felt certain that we were going to levitate while also fearing that I moved with the stiffness of an old peramulator. "Let go...let go," she said in a whisper.

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> "I can't."
> "Of course you can...first your feet... then your knees ...then your head..." (113).

Anna begins to respond to Catalina's persuasion and begins to loosen up a little.

Catalina's mother is quiet and passive, and totally cowed by a domineering husband, who flails Catalina occasionally. At home she is a different person. It is a strict Catholic household and they are as much repressed by religion and custom as the characters in *A Pagan Place*. From where then does this free-spirited daughter emerge? Later in the novel we realize that Catalina has been raised by her old grandmother, who had been dubbed "mad" because of her beliefs in ancient practices. She is considered a witch by many, but Catalina loves and respects the old woman whose life is closely connected to nature. The feelings are mutual:

> The two sideposts and the lintel above the door were daubed with red. It was the blood of a ewe. Her grandmother had done it with a hyssop branch, to keep the evil one out: they believed in spells, in spirits, in incantation. They studied the flight of the taloned birds and entrails for signs, signs in the colour of the gall and the symmetry of the liver lobe. Her grandmother had reared her, had told her many secrets and together they

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> traveled back in time to their bivouac days, to their Moorish ancestors. They saw what mortal eyes could not see. 'People think we are mad,' she said, with triumph.
> The cat watched us walk away, watched with a sort of knowingness, then darted through the window space to guard the house (117).

Anna and Catalina's growing fondness for one another does not go unnoticed in the small village. One English woman who has settled there warns Anna about the association. "Visitors come here and try to taint the locals." "Do you mean Catalina?" 'I said boldly.' After a long interior monologue Anna manages to respond. "She is a free spirit." The English woman's perception of Catalina differs from Anna's. "She is a respectable girl, from a respectable family." The English woman might well have been one of the self-righteous matrons of the west of Ireland having her say.

Anna and Catalina grow closer. Catalina chides Anna for reading too much and not getting out to enjoy nature. They begin riding through the village on Catalina's motor scooter to the wagging tongues of the respectable villagers. Anna discovers that

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occasionally Catalina reads also. Her choice of reading material leaves us in no doubt as to where her allegiance belongs:

> She said yes, that she liked fabulous tales about gods and goddesses and that her heroine was Gaia, the earth mother who even when she lost everything was not vanquished (145).

Anna and Catalina recklessly pursue their relationship. They take a bus ride into the country and examine some ancient ruins. The two women confide in one another and are so engrossed in each other's stories that they miss the last bus back to town and are forced to stay the night. They make their way to an old abandoned cave (also the seat of the goddess) and prepare a feast on the fire prepared by Catalina. The symbolism of the scene is apparent as the fire of passion is eventually ignited between the two women:

> I stood there looking at the little wan blaze from the candle as it skewed hither and thither, thinking what a bleak place it would be, without her, what a dungeon, but her presence gave it the glow and ritual of a palace. I felt elated, as if set down in some faraway universe (150).

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The two women exchange stories from their past. Neither one is judgmental. They listen with acute interest and a real communion of spirits takes place. Catalina in her exuberance bursts into song:

> All of a sudden she started to sing. It was in her own tongue. It burst out of her in a great unbridled flow. The whole mountain was filled with it, so that the sheep in their sleep could hear it, as could the distant peaks. At times I thought it was addressed to a man or a woman, certainly a loved one, at other times it meandered like a long Arabic chant. I knew that in it were expressions of pain and longing that cut right down to the bone of the heart, to the bone of the night. She did not finish as much as she allowed her voice to trail away, barely audible, then inaudible, yet I felt she was singing a last fragment of it inside her head, a last plea to God, or man or nature or whatever (153).

Anna is then invited to sing, but her singing is like her swimming. She is still unable to sing. She recalls a "special bird having no particular voice, or no particular color, in short being dull and self-effacing" (153). Anna sees herself in the bird. She does, however, narrate the old Irish myth of Queen Medb (Maeve) and the "Cattle Raid of Cooley." It is one of the few myths where a woman displays some semblance of power over her own destiny. Catalina

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is fascinated by the story and drifts off to sleep. Anna. intoxicated by the day's events yearns for female comfort:

> I lay there stiffly. quietly confiding to myself that I wanted to hold her. be held by her. but in her sleep. so that our night-selves might reach out. and give each other that thread of sustenance that we craved. the invisible sustenance. not what we sought from men. something other. womenly, primordial. I feared that she might rebuff me. might move away in horror. I feared too that having touched her. something would alter in me (156).

Later in the night Anna and Catalina participate in a brief but passionate sexual experience. They are profoundly moved by it. In the dawn of the new day Anna's fear and shame return.. Without shame Catalina tries to calm her and reassures her of the value of their experience:

> "Don't be afraid," she said, then she kissed me and the kiss was a seal. Her face was beautiful and not beautiful, it was a little swarthy and wet from the baptism. Our night was nothing to fear either, but to carry within us, not as a memory of debauch, but a constant, like one of those streams or rills that one hears when walking along a country road, but that one does not see, simply knows it to be there (158).

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A spiritual connection has been made. To consummate that connection, on the return trip to town Catalina offers Anna a huge spray of lilac (another plant sacred to the earth goddess). "Show them that in London" she urges Anna.

Anna's stay in Spain is almost over, and a happier Anna sustained by her experience with Catalina seems ready to cope once more with the stresses of London life. She has found what she sought, a loosening-up of the spirit, a lightness of being, delight in all forms of nature again, a feeling of belonging; faith and hope have reentered the soul. But Anna and Catalina have ignored the rules of this tightly guarded patriarchal society, and are not going to be allowed to escape that easily. The angry God must be appeased.

One of the stalwart Christians has written on Catalina's wall "lesbos." Catalina is again flailed. D'arcy, at Anna's bidding, endeavors to mitigate matters by painting the same sign on the walls of the houses inhabited by several village matriarchs. Anna receives a note of warning from Catalina that Anna is in danger. A mysterious man has been stalking her. As Anna hurriedly prepares to leave the village she learns of Catalina's death at the

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hands of this mysterious stranger who turns out to have been Catalina's estranged husband. She had died trying to protect Anna. The ladies in black assemble with the men of the village all united in rage against Anna. She narrowly escapes lynching thanks to the machinations of the glib D'Arcy and Catalina's old grandmother, who embraces her and gives her a lock of Catalina's hair. Again there is no legitimate avenue for spiritual freedom within the prison of culture and organized religion. Anna has been renewed by her relationship with Catalina, but the girl, the only representative of the free spirit in the novel is sacrificed. There is no resurrection without death. Is Anna truly resurrected? That is hard to say. She has certainly been altered psychologically, and refuses to succumb to the shame and guilt heaped upon her by the villagers. She is less cowering, but still has a long way to go to gain the confidence and assertiveness of genuine female authenticity. The old grandmother becomes a reminder of the female strength that once was, and of what the possibilities are if one has the courage to pursue feminine power. But the hank of Catalina's hair reminds us of the cost. Matted with blood yet glistening the gory gift is offered to Anna:

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> "Muy precioso... muy precioso," she said her voice choking. But it was with a kind of ecstasy that she gave it to me. Take it, she was saying, for to love one must learn to part with everything. Then she was gone, hobbling like an unfledged bird or a creature on stilts (180).

We are left to speculate if Anna has really achieved the strength for sacrifice. True authenticity would demand the sacrifice of complete acquiescence to man-made rules for woman's behavior. I do not think she is quite ready for that yet.

HOUSE OF SPLENDID ISOLATION

House of Splendid Isolation (1994) marks O'Brien's entry into two previously ignored realms. She ventures into nationalism and the current political strife in Ireland, and she moves away from her stereotypical male characterizations which after several novels begin to merge into authoritarian one-dimensional "types." I am being kind in saying that her gifts generally do not lie in her portrayal of men. In McGreevy, one of the main characters in *House of Splendid Isolation* there is a definite effort on O'Brien's

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part to make the male character credible. In this novel we also see the effects of nationalism on several characters. The story is narrated by many voices; many perspectives are given, but the dominating voices of the novel are those of McGreevy and Josie.

McGreevy an IRA gunman on the run, dodging the law from all sides, finds himself forcing his way into the isolated "big house" refuge of Josie O'Meara, an elderly widow who has withdrawn not only from the strife of the times, but from life itself. The relationship between this unlikely pair provides the tension in the novel. The characters cannot escape history; it surrounds them.

> 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 (3).

We infer from the early chapters that nationalism has been corrupted. Just as Gallagher, the IRA leader in O'Flaherty's *The Informer* has his meeting place in the "bogey hole," when we first witness McGreevy, he "sleeps with the manure bags." He sees himself as a messianic figure: "Three plastic bags and a manger of straw. Like Jesus"(13). While he has lost his belief in Catholicism, he has been converted wholeheartedly to nationalism,

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and considers himself some kind of savior of his people and his country. He commandeers Josie's house and thereby initiates an unusual relationship between the two. As they play a cat-and-mouse game trying to outwit one another, their knowledge of each other grows.

We learn of Josie's past through long flashbacks initiated by some of McGreevy's assumptions. He had not happened upon her house by accident, but had been directed there by another nationalist sympathizer, the idealistic Paud, who had idealized Josie as a young woman. Like many nationalists, Paud had placed her on some pedestal, and exaggerated her powers. Dealing with a concocted romantic image of woman is far safer than dealing with the everyday needs of a real flesh and blood woman. McGreevy unwittingly acknowledges the discrepancy with his bitter recollections of Paud's description of Josie:

> "So this is the woman you raved about, Queen of the Munster Fairies," he says, and laughs, quietly and bitterly, and enacts having a smoke. He is talking to Paud, remembers Paud blathering about the house and the woman, like a lady on a coin with a leash of hounds, her husband and herself martyrs for Ireland. Paud, a bit of a loner, working up North with

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> handicapped children. but eager. ever eager. to pass messages or hand out leaflets or the newspaper and lamenting the fact that he was too old to join up and do missions. As if he could be entrusted with something as dangerous as that (67).

What kind of woman is Josie? She is far from the unrealistic portrait painted by Paud. She is another of O'Brien's stranded women whose long reflections on her past life give glimpses at her reasons for withdrawing from the world of men. Enticed back to Ireland from a short stint as a maid in Brooklyn, she marries James O'Meara, a gentleman landowner with a large house and a larger passion for horses. The marriage moves Josie up a rung on the social ladder by providing her at last with a home of her own. On their wedding day Josie has a clearer look at what her life will be like with James. He lives with his bachelor brother and together they crudely relate a story of mayflies mating which totally disgusts Josie. James realizes the story was inappropriate, but does little to calm his new bride's fear of intimacy, (another common fear with O'Brien's women):

> "But they give life," James said, and wondered if perhaps his wife would not have preferred a more romantic story attached to the Shannon lake, the one

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> about the Colleen Bawn, the jilted woman who was drowned and whose death was traced later by the appearance of her corset on the water.
>
> Without warning he rose, pulled her from her seat, their arms a distance from each other, tugging and testing each other's strength as they crossed and trounced the shadows in the gaunt lamplit room (39).

James' treats Josie like a "brood mare" and his crude "horsey" lovemaking repels her. Nevertheless, when she finds he has gone off to his horses the day after their marriage, she is both hurt and insulted. "To her to be abandoned the morning after her marriage was no little thing. She might have to go back to her own people" (40). The relationship between Josie and James quickly deteriorates as he begins to drink heavily, and is even more brutish in his advances. She tries to fight him off but is overcome by his physical strength. Her powerlessness as a woman is evidenced in the following painful description of one of their frequent sexual encounters:

> In the morning he mounts her without a word because she has got into the goddamn habit of saying no and stop and no. He has taken to holding her lips shut with one hand, clamping the way he might clamp an animal, and he has grown to like it; he likes the power he has

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> over her. making her sing dumb....Only in the last slobbery gasps does he release her lips to hear the no and stop and no.
>
> "You can't stop me now missus," calling her all the names under the sun. including tinker's names. and each time thinks. She will have issue, a son. To rile her he asks if she enjoys it, and when she says no or nothing. he takes a shoehorn. the bone one. and presses it into her mouth until she groans and moans and emits a sort of stubborn sound that is neither come nor non-come. She says yes. because she has to. and he chortles because he has possessed her. has had his way (47-48).

Josie's attitude toward her body again reflects Victorian and Jansenist attitudes. Religion. culture and personal experience have left her feeling sensually dead. "When she thought of her body she thought of those large dead fish which she had seen in a fish shop in Brooklyn. smothered in crushed ice, the mottled scales a-glitter." Nature occasionally offers respite. "Yes, she liked to walk. especially in the spring, bluebells, hawthorn blossoms, things like that (134). Finally a ray of hope enters her bleak existence with the arrival a young priest. She is touched by his description of the Dutch landscape:

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> Father John has been invited and was in their sitting room. in their midst. the very same as a bank clerk or one of the dappers. and their not having to call him Father at all. this at his request. He had been to Holland since he had seen them. at a conference discussing with other priests how to modernise Mother Church. He was describing the landscape-unending low land. the cumulus skies. downpours of rain. water mills. their red roofs the color of cock's combs (135).

The emotionally starved Josie begins to see John as her savior. She prepares for him like one of the handmaidens of Jesus:

> Hurrying in she laid the green branches on the table. and the sight of them was like a scene pictured in the Gospels or a Bible she once had. She should get ointments with which to anoint him. Yes. things were becoming headier (139).

John becomes interested in Josie and senses her deep misery. She has been able to find no spiritual solace in religion. but is reluctant to reveal this to the young priest:

> "You're not happy, he said.
> "It can get gloomy," she said. and looked about somewhat flustered and moved the dish of flowers to another part of the table.
> "To whom do you go for comfort?"

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> "Nobody... My religion," she said, and wondered if he saw that she was lying, because in fact her religion had never been a comfort, never throughout the early years of her marriage, when she looked out at the listless fields, at the teacloths and underclothes flapping on the clothesline, the mutinous bullocks mounting each other in sport or desperation, and swore at the tassle of the window blind that for no noticeable reason went rat-a-tat-tat...rat-a-tat-tat at given times (140).

John offers Josie comfort, but has his own demons to wrestle with. They agree to picnic in one of the fields. Josie imagines a romantic interlude. In a brief moment of abandon she discards her corset, a symbol of her bodily confinement. John, however, never shows. A crestfallen Josie plods wearily home to a violent confrontation with James. Paud had found the corset, and innocently returned it to James not realizing its implications. Like the young narrator of *A Pagan Place* she is punished severely for her association with a priest. He beats her black and blue:

> Zanily he beat her for the pleasures he had not given her and which he believed were wantonly gratified in the woods. Nothing would make him understand that she had gone there to no avail and nothing would make her tell it (147).

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Anna receives scurrilous anonymous letters and begins to atone for what might have been. She assigns herself unsavory tasks in contrition for her uncommitted sin:

> She'd take the buckets she had filled, two at a time, to a cow house or a hen house, swish the water all over, and sweep out the scour and the droppings, telling herself that yes, she was atoning, she was doing penance for an unlived sin (152).

During this period Josie, like some pale heroine in a fairytale, stills holds on to frail hope that John will come to her rescue. Weeks later, as she sits on a ditch after a country walk, he passes by in his car. Upon seeing her, he speeds by without acknowledgment. A devastated Josie is forced to face facts. There is no salvation forthcoming. She wrestles with her hopeless condition, and tries to forget her emotional needs as a woman. The loneliness and lack of fulfillment in her marriage take a toll as she tries to live a life of self-denial. The body and soul must get used to suppression. "How long would it take? How long does it take to murder first the body and then the image interred with that body, outlasting it, outliving it, refusing to give up the ghost?" (155). Predictably, with no psychological respite in sight, and no spiritual strength to sustain

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her. Josie has a complete mental breakdown and is institutionalized. She eventually becomes a nurse-like figure to the ageing James, and they continue their lives in virtual silence until his death.

Creena, to whom Josie had just revealed the story of her life, has embraced the nationalist vision completely. Creena is devoted to McGreevy and his cause. She and her mother (also an ardent nationalist) refuse to help the authorities in their search for McGreevy. Her father had been killed during former "troubles" and they consider it their patriotic duty to support the men on the run. Creena personifies the selfless female who sacrifices her own life to support the ideals of the nationalist cause. What she fails to realize is that her adulation of McGreevy is misplaced, and to him she is not really an individual woman, but a means to an end. His singleness of purpose leaves no room for romantic involvements. Despite her protestations that her interest in him is political, her inner yearnings are revealed not in her spoken words, but her private thoughts:

> "And the beautiful thing was..." [she repeats Anna's phrase about John.] Creena repeated but could not go on.

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> A little frown came over her. To say such a thing would be to forgo everything, to stamp on her dreams, to crush that one dream that McGreevy would stop mourning his dead wife and come in the night and talk with her and tell her that he had come to settle. It was the only hope she had (158).

Only in her heart of hearts does Creena admit that she too like Josie needs love. However, an open admission at such a time would be considered a betrayal of nationalism. Woman's place was to inspire the nationalists with a goal to fight for, not to get in the way of Ireland's freedom by making demands for individual relationships. Women's feelings are sacrificed while the men play the patriot game.

However, it is not only women who are sacrificed to the cause. Young men like Paud and McGreevy are seduced by the myth of Mother Ireland's redemption. They willingly offer their lives, and will glorify the martyrs who have preceded them. By some strange irony it is considered more glorious to die for one's country than to live in it. Nationalism takes on an energy of its own and feeds the imaginations of male and female alike, except that it assigns to women, a passive role removed from the seat of power,

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similar to the position of nuns in the Catholic Church. When Josie asks Creena what she loves about McGreevy she quickly answers. "Everything." He's a volunteer. isn't he" (159). as though that were explanation enough.

The relationship between McGreevy and Josie. which had begun in suspicion and mistrust. blossoms in to one of mutual sympathy and respect. These two individuals actually talk about important issues to each other. not only about politics and religion. but about genuine fears and through the interchange we glimpse at the devastation to the psyche when individuals male or female attempt to deny authentic feelings. Slowly Josie's spirit comes alive again. A new energy and sense of purpose fill her life. Danger surrounds them. as the law is closing in on McGreevy, true spiritual connection takes place in that house of "splendid isolation." However. the communion of two souls is destined to be sundered, and we are reminded. as in *The High Road*, that a price must be exacted. McGreevy leaves Josie's house in his last bid to escape. A changed Josie refuses to reveal his whereabouts. A convert now to life, she adds, "Nothing would make her betray him now" (166). She rushes to Creena's house to warn him of danger, but has an

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accident and is left unconscious on the road. McGreevy is criticized by his comrades Brennan. and Cassidy for rushing to her assistance. "I couldn't let her die" (173). is all he can reply. McGreevy too has been humanized by Josie.

Later. McGreevy. for some inexplicable reason unknown even to himself returns to Josie's house:

> What want in him had brought him back? Why hadn't he stayed in that shed, with Cassidy and the rats. beside the thing. working it out in his mind, every thread and fibre of it. the coiled silence of it. a duplicate of himself? (197).

He walks into a trap set by the combined forces of the law.

Josie cuts her hair in a sudden unpredictable act. She realizes that the house is surrounded by soldiers, guards, policemen all united to mow down McGreevy the terrorist. She plans to intercede on his behalf. "When she awakens, she already knows what she must do. Drawing on an old raincoat she hurries out, barefoot. They must not kill him" (220). "The woman has no fear. She is calling as she moves, groping through the wilderness of the smoke. He must be taken alive" (221). Josie has finally shed her fear. She has found gumption at last. Moments later she is shot by mistake and dies immediately. She has finally been able to sacrifice, which

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makes a slight advance on Anna in *The High Road.* "She had to die," a sergeant says, a tall man who is holding a sprig of shiny laurel in his hand. "For what? For Ireland. For martyrdom. For feck-all" (224). He articulates the uselessness of the sacrifice. McGreevy is wounded and taken away on a stretcher. To the onlookers he has become "a man lying on a stretcher with the cold unswerving conviction of a Messiah. Human error. Human cruelty. Hungry cawing crows" (227).

How much McGreevy has been transformed by his experience seems hard to measure. This novel allows no easy resolutions. O'Brien refuses to take sides. There are no winners; everyone loses. It moves beyond woman's predicament, to the universal predicament of mankind in finding acceptable ways to coexist on this earth without the need to annihilate one another. It implies a need to search for global healing, a basic need for people to become wholly human again.

In each of these three novels the protagonist finds temporary relief to her bruised psyche by running away from the circumstances in her life which overwhelm and threaten to annihilate her spirit. The young narrator of *A Pagan Place* escapes

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to a convent with no real religious vocation to sustain her. She sacrifices her self for the shallow attentions of the villagers and the respect of her parents. Anna, in *The High Road*, flees to sunny Spain finding temporary solace with the free-spirited Catalina. However, the relationship has to be sacrificed with Catalina's death. Josie, in *House of Splendid Isolation* retreats from the world to her big house. After finally connecting to McGreevy, another human being, and finding a reason for living, she too is sacrificed. All three protagonists are in fact sacrificed.

For the spirit of each of these women there is no true escape in this life. Spiritual autonomy is unattainable. While the spirit is given a momentary balm, a temporary stay of confusion, and occasional glimpses of authenticity, they are but brief respites before the inevitable shackles are replaced on that diminished thing.

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CHAPTER THREE

> I want, therefore, to explore the ways in which we women (never mind how cruel the circumstances) have betrayed ourselves, and we must realize that whatever the fates ordained, we bear the responsibility and must seek our own enlightenment (Heilbrun, *Reinventing Womanhood* 138).

SCANDALOUS WOMEN

The spiritually and emotionally repressed women who inhabit the emotional wasteland of Edna O'Brien's fiction are assaulted by many forces within Irish society and culture. Even when the protagonists live abroad, the Irish influence is either apparent or softly veiled. O'Brien implies there is no way to eradicate the indoctrination of centuries completely. In this chapter I would like to examine woman's own culpability in aiding and abetting the forces which devalue her, and of her complicity in the perpetuation of her own failure to break the circle of uncertainty and rise against the forces of oppression. O'Brien makes it obvious that patriarchy is largely responsible for women's secondary role in society and in the church, a subject dealt with thoroughly in Kathleen Jacquette's recent work. I would like to assign some of that responsibility to

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the shoulders of the women themselves by examining how females interact with females in several of O'Brien's works. I certainly do not intend to absolve patriarchal forces; I just plan to study the ladies first, and in doing so, rename the "scandalous women."

Where do girl children find their role models if not with their mothers, sisters, friends, teachers, saints or Madonnas? At some point in most of O'Brien's novels we find the protagonist looking for a nurturing female presence to either emulate or embrace. However, like the search for female authenticity, it is usually elusive. Ironically, in most cases, it is the pariahs of society, the moral failures, the rebels, the lapsed Catholics, and the "scandalous women" marginalised because of their rejection of prevailing mores, who are the only ones of any real assistance to the passive protagonist-victims of O'Brien's prose. She implies that the *real* "scandalous women" are the stalwart defenders of the faith, protectors of Irish culture, religion, and tradition who perpetuate the status quo, regardless of its effects on the lives of women.

What O'Brien seems to be moving towards is a slow but steady revelation of truths still too painful to voice. Yet it is noticeable in her most recently published novel, *Down By The*

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River. that revelation is close at hand. Just one more push should do it. It is both terrifying and exciting to contemplate the results. Redeeming the feminine by telling the unvarnished truth about woman's experience is indeed a challenging quest. as Muriel Rukeyser expressed in her poem "Kathe Kollwitz":

> What would happen if one woman told
> the truth about her life? The world
> would split open (Leonard. 164).

Truth. according to O'Brien. is each individual's genuine response to experience. Experience will always supersede doctrine. Truth is learned and felt. not taught. and certainly not to be confused with what Nancy Miller considers. "the maxims that pass for the truth of human experience" (Leonard. 163). The truth of the protagonists' experiences with females will be examined in this chapter.

MOTHERS

The females of O'Brien's fiction are besieged by mothers of many kinds. I mentioned in previous chapters how the Nationalists had idealized the country itself by advocating the doctrine of life or death for "Mother Ireland." With Ireland frequently portrayed as an

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unassailable female. Irish women had this burden of idealism thrust upon their shoulders and were beginning to murmur, though sometimes under their breaths. "Mother Ireland get off our backs!" (Mother Ireland video). Mother Church had made her contribution too, by demanding total modesty in dress for all females, ignorance of the biological facts of life, because sex was sinful, and the body was dirty. Virginity was advocated, except of course after marriage when the female was then expected to breed as many souls as possible for the Church, which would eventually increase its membership and consequently its power. Seen in this light, it is easy to explain the Church's dogged stand against contraception and abortion. What had Mother Church to gain by relaxing its rules?

What women lost in terms of personal and psychological freedom was a subject considered both inappropriate and of little consequence. Women should become "Children of Mary" and look to Mary, the Virgin mother of God, as a model. The paradox here is clear. Women should model themselves after the Virgin, and remain "children," but still propagate the race without limit. They should become the objects of male desire, but desire nothing for themselves but the self-effacing role of child-mother. What is so

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incredible about this outrageous situation is the large number of women who accepted these restrictions without a whimper. They not only accepted them, many exalted them, while others endorsed them with their acquiescence.

Mother Nature also looms large in the experiences of O'Brien's females, a fact which I referred to thoroughly in the previous chapter. There is no doubt that the women of O'Brien's fiction are deeply affected by Nature. Frequently this influence enhances and enlarges their lives, occasionally becoming the vital force that averts catastrophe for the protagonist. However, as I pointed out in chapter two through the narrator of *A Pagan Place*, Nature is not enough. Mother Nature cannot fully console repressed human nature.

Moreover, the mother who becomes the major motif in several of O'Brien's novels is the biological mother, whether living or dead. Even deceased parents have considerable influence on the living, as Robert Anderson reminds us, "Death ends a life, but it does not end a relationship, which struggles on in a survivor's mind toward some final resolution, some clear meaning, which it perhaps never finds" (Anderson, 652). While the protagonist of *A Pagan Place*

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eventually psychologically rejects the mother, who had failed to defend her when she had been molested by Father Declan, she ostensibly embraces Mother Church and joins a convent in Brussels. However, in this novel there remains some semblance of "mother idealization" (Miller, 27) which impedes the daughter's ability to form a true picture of her mother.

CASUALTIES OF PEACE

In *Casualties of Peace* we find the protagonist, Willa McCord, trying to extricate herself emotionally from playing the perennial victim role in her relationships with men. She constantly takes retrospective glances at her childhood in Ireland. The protagonist has long since relocated to England, where she works in cut glass, "learning to weave her fear into a glassbound ocean or a crown of thorns" (37). Again the protagonist fears intimacy and is terrified of sex. She describes herself as "the oldest living twenty-six year old virgin" (37), despite the fact that she had survived a brutal marriage with Herod, and is involved with a new lover, Auro, who is eagerly waiting to consummate their union.

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Willa is emotionally paralyzed and seeks to find the source of her frigidity in the past. She still searches for a mother. "I need a mother--man, woman and child all need mothering" (34). Where was her mother when her education in sex began? She tries to remember her first awareness of the biological changes in her own body. In several letters, which she writes to Auro but never mails, decides to relate a childhood memory, hoping that putting her pain on paper might alleviate it:

> Once upon a time I was out for a walk and I began to menstruate. I didn't know what it was because no one had told me and still I did know because I was not surprised. I was frightened. I couldn't walk. I could neither go back nor go forwards. I forget how I got home (120).

The attack on the mother's failure to instruct the daughter on the biological facts of life is implied here. The criticism of the mother is veiled, but the undercurrents of the daughter's resentment and rebellion are there, and will surface with greater intensity in subsequent novels.

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NIGHT

Mary Hooligan of *Night* is the closest O'Brien comes to portraying a liberated female in any of her works. However, even Mary, a sort of amoral extension of Joyce's Molly Bloom, has to struggle with the ghosts of her mother, Lil. Mary lies in bed while streams of consciousness gush from her memory during the course of one long night and reflect her life story. She ponders over her lack of real knowledge and registers the gap in her experience. Her ramblings indicate some of her confusion:

> I lie with my God. I lie without my God. Into the folds of sleep. Oh, Connemara, oh, sweet mauve hills, where will I go, where will I not go now? Fucking nowhere....Not that I know what I need to know. Not that I do. I am a woman, at least I am led to believe so: I bleed, et cetera (4).

We learn very early in the novel that a sundering with the mother has occurred, when Mary admits: "I used to have such a penchant for feeling; now I feel as much for the woman in the train who had the flushes as for the woman, Lil, who bore me" (3). We do not yet know the nature of Mary's breach with her mother, but quickly infer that there has been a long standing animosity

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between them that is deep-rooted and bitter. Throughout the novel O'Brien gradually discloses Mary's resentment together with her ongoing search for genuine affection. While Mary is frequently disappointed. she is never totally devastated by her role in life. Despite her occasional cynicism. she is more resilient than most of O'Brien's protagonists.

Mary has had many relationships with men. but has never felt truly loved. Like her opposite. the frigid Willa of *Casualties of Peace*. she too is incapable of true love. As Mary ponders her predicament. she confronts her own mortality and wants to be buried on a remote island far from relations. We still see the undercurrents of historical. religious. and familial conflicts burdening her mind. as she longs to finally relinquish the last vestiges of hope to which she apparently still clings. She yearns to be allowed to be herself:

> The truth is, I do not wish to be buried with my own kith and kin. Another blow for King James and for the green. I do not want to be buried with anyone else's kith and kin either. One for King Billy....
>
> Maybe, I want to be myself at last and to be robbed of that stupid, suppurating malady they call hope. Not to be a member of the communion of saints or gods or demigods or

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> fathers or mothers or grandfathers or grandmothers or brothers or sisters or brethren of any kind, germane to me through consanguinity, affinity, or any other kind of linear or genitive or collateral bond. To face the music at last (7).

Here she rejects all the forces which prevent her confronting her true self and the consequences of her own decisions. However, Mary is not quite up to "facing the music" and her musings are riddled with contradictions. Almost immediately, she is "snooping for pals... who will keep at a distance... leave me my soul's crust, and my winding dirging effluvias" (7). Mary wants both intimacy and her own space, connection which permits authenticity.

Thoughts of her mother trigger Mary's own memories of motherhood as she recalls her feelings for her son, Tutsie, the child from her unhappy union with Dr. Flaggler:

> When at first he was tonsured and I used to be putting a bonnet on him, the crown of his head spoke to me of former massacres, his little bones used to suggest holocausts....
> A mother's love, like yeast, multiplying, the spores rising up over the lid of the world, too much (8).

She is well aware of the overwhelming quality of mother's love, how it can suffocate and obliterate all other emotions -- the unbreakable cord of communion that must eventually be broken if

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the individuals involved. mother or child are ever to achieve full individuality. She acknowledges the primordial reverberations of this universal conflict with its echoes of "former massacres."

Mary writes a letter of complaint to her mother. but realizes after she mails it that her mother is already dead. Mary tries for levity but falters. "I lack the talent for instigating comedy. They put it down to grief"(14). She then recalls the circumstances of her mother's death. and the bitterness it engendered for all concerned:

> Lil had a penchant for the colloquial for things like " The early bird catches the worm." but I had to sit there and hear the adages of Saints Jerome and Bonaventure trotted out as applicable material. How little we make of what we know of anyone. how little we employ it.
>
> Of course she did not die without a long illness. mothers never do. fathers likewise.... There is nothing so offensive as hoodwinking the nearly dead. We die by degrees, but there is one part of us that decidedly knows when it is almost over (15-16).

There is great pain and ambivalence in Mary's reactions to her mother's death. We do not yet know the contents of the letter which causes her so much anxiety, nor do we know what lies at the heart of her discomfort. On the one hand, she acknowledges the austerity

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and pain of her mother's life. "She said you could put all the pleasures that had gone into her life into a little thimble"(16). On the other hand, psychologically, she holds back her comfort from her dying mother. There is still some deep-rooted resentment that is not yet voiced.

Mary's mother dies also without any spiritual comfort. Ironically, the iron-clad faith in Catholicism to which she had clung so tenaciously all her life deserts her at the end, and she dies without spiritual comfort. Her one pathetic regret is for her needless cruelty to an old tinker woman who stole her shoes. This failure to recognize other women as sisters returns to haunt her last moments:

> She admitted that she was losing her faith. It was forsaking her at the very moment when she needed to have it in order to present her credentials.... That hat pin prodded her. It turned out not to be a hat pin at all but a pair of shoes that had got stolen by a tinker woman from the windowsill where they were put to dry.... The judge lit into her [the tinker] and gave a lecture about the Sixth and Seventh Commandments. Lil said the scarifying bit was when she had to go up on the rostrum and identify the said shoes.... She said she would have done anything to have wiped them with the nap of her coat, and have the case quashed. The culprit got a month in the county jail. "And I in dread of peelers," she said over and over again.

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> It knawed into her, that crime, that cruelty, like the rats that gnawed behind the wainscoting in Bruges or Brussels or wherever I had made that dastard journey with my spouse (18-19).

Mary sees the futility of her mother's sacrifices, but is not yet ready to forgive or forget the damage Lil's rigorous adherence to Catholicism has done to her relationship with her daughter. Alice Miller refers to this type of predicament as the Abraham and Isaac syndrome, where the parent is blinded by obedience to God's law, and never notices the child as victim (Miller, 137-145). The child must some day see the parent truthfully in order to heal the wounded psyche. Mary grows harder and increasingly more cynical towards her mother as she recalls her own first sexual encounter:

> I fled from it in the tender years, after an incident, deflowering, a botched job, a case of *coitus interruptus* if ever there was one. Took place not in a canoe or on a chaise longue but out in the open, with a fellow who hailed from the city, a one-night stand. It was St. Peter and St. Paul's Day, hence a holy day of obligation....A nice night out, bats, summer moths, everything sultry as in the land of Lotus: Boss and Lil safely at home reciting the Rosary (32-33).

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The bitterness of Mary's tone is unmistakable here as she intimates her reasons for bolting from Ireland. The "crooner" who had used her. and discarded her had left her in a moral quandary. Church and family offer no support to the naive girl and panic sets in:

> I began to get a touch of morning sickness, even though it was bordering on midnight. I foresaw things. amplification of the event. cudgels. the ecclesiastical intervention. and opprobrium from within the bosom of the family. So I decided to make myself scarce. I took the night boat to the land across the water. to get cacodemonized. as Lil would say if she were on earth, and asked for her opinion.
>
> I don't know anyone who hasn't grown up in a madhouse whose catechizing hasn't been, Do this, Do that, Don't do this. Do do it. I'll cut the tongue out of you. How bloody dare you. D'you hear? I said, Don't do it, Do do it, Sing, Vocalize, Belt up. Blow your nose, Stop picking that nose. Piss, Eat your pandy, Stop making that noise. Who farted? No farting, Don't shit, you shit you (34).

The impetus for Mary's moral lapse has been more from ignorance and sexual curiosity than from any deliberate rebellion against repression. She already intuits the ramifications of her rashness. Her past experiences in this puritanical society have prepared her for censorship on every level. The society in which she

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has lived has become a "madhouse" of dogma and duty, with rules and regulations employed ostensibly to protect members from sin, but which also curtail freedom of choice, and the right to make mistakes. Commands are issued which leave no room in the girl's life for her to be her true self. She must either conform or confess. There is no allowance in this closed society for sexual trifling. Moral blunders are unforgivable.

Fully aware of her "sin" Mary doesn't waste time making excuses for her behavior. She knows she is no match for the prevailing religious and cultural powers which direct and dominate the life of her village, and which are supported and condoned by her parents. Consequently, she philosophically accepts her new role of pariah and leaves.

On a deeper level the bitterness of her tone reveals the wound inflicted on the psyche by the threat of social ostracism. It is easier for the powers of society to condemn and publicly expose errant behavior, and humiliate the "sinner" by withdrawing emotional support, than it is for those same powers to guide, console and embrace the wayward girl. Mary is no angel, but she is no devil either. She has a curiosity and a zest for life that is being frustrated

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in many areas.

The confusion and bitterness within Mary continues to boil as she thinks about her former love relationships, and aborted efforts to make intimate connections. Her problems with men are closely intertwined with her parental conflicts. Her unconsummated affair with Moriarity is a symptom of her fear of intimacy, which is directly related to her early experiences with her mother's squeamishness towards sex. She finds her memories of her mother strangulating, and struggles to untie the umbilical knot which still binds them. She has come from a land of nots and knots:

> I used to cart him [Moriarity] to his bed. We never consummated it. It was about the best there was, I mean the most rending, apart from the blood knots. It was more of a bone knot. Down with blood knots, bone knots, Minoan knots, Tristram knots, Druidic knots, and Lil's whittled specialty, the mother's knot (36).

Mary's ambivalent connection with her mother whose religious scruples about sex have tainted all her own relationships with the men in her life, has produced a similar fear of intimacy in her daughter which is frequently a problem.

Mary has not yet purged her animosity towards her mother out

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of her system. She knows something is still sticking in her craw, causing the old "psychological choke" that prevents the spirit's song. However, she intuits the soul's need to sing its own song, and while she cannot articulate the need directly, we recognize the analogy:

> To see the Moon if it should saunter by. To invite it in. To have this room and my own gray anatomy lit and plaited with silver thread. A transfiguration. Moon gaze and half-heard hymn, two of my fixations, on a par with my fondness for little birds, each and every species, each feathered fingerful with its own recklessness, its throat of fire. I understand there are bird squads, commandos who go with fumes and searchlights to rid the atmosphere of song. May God wither up their hearts, may their blood cease to flow...(41).

Despite Mary's indignant tone she admits her tenderness towards her mother, and the existence of that "goddamn dreg of love" that is ever present. Even as Mary philosophically muses on her amoral escapades with men, the memory of her mother's ghost still plagues her, and again her ambivalence is voiced:

> Lil had the audacity to appear there one night, swaddled in linen no less, and with a rosary swinging from her waist. The curtains lifted as if a flame or a breeze had been put to them, and she there she was, rouged, rejuvenated. Full of wise saws

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> about Jesus. whom she called Jesu. I found it an impertinence myself. She had her little gold sleepers in her ears. Some goddamn dreg of love welled up in me and I wanted to put my hand out and touch the earlobe. the cool. the white earlobe that just missed being chafed by the rim of the gold. I wanted to tweak it. At the same time I wished she'd make herself scarce and said so. She was sermonizing in her customary voice about the joys of heaven and the writhing woes of hell. I wanted to inquire into the statute acreage of same and also ask if unfortunate children got born there.... To tell you the truth, her visitation gave me the willies... Then she started to infer that she would be a resident here for all time. keeping a total watch.... I had the most terrible feeling. the most shocking realization: you cannot kill the dead. I woke up howling and aiming the warming pan at her. I gathered up my effects (42-43).

Mary knows that she has to go beyond the "brink of suffocation" in her relationship with her mother. She needs her mother's unconditional emotional support free from religious sermonizing. She recognizes the necessity of the fragmented self to become whole again. "Perhaps it is this that makes us stalwart in the end, this marriage of self with totally stranded self. Alone as a husk" (107).

We never do learn the contents of the letter where Mary reveals her ire. She never does reconcile with her mother, but she

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tries to let her fade in memory. However. she does manage to makes her peace with Nature and the land she loved and left:

> Oh. mine own land. a lifetime away and still near me now and for eternity. Is there an eternity--there must be. we have such bodings about it. It is not it that haunts us at night. it is the bogey man and the freshly dead. Oh. land of yew trees and forts and the quicken rods. keep old, wear your old age well. and your stately stoop: the rags that hang about you are like mantles. the mantles of knowledge and wisdom. Young men will try to procure you. you will be wooed by mediators and mercenaries, do not at the eleventh hour barter yourself, do not sell your old soul.... That is why I went. [back] to show some nature. to make my peace (110).

Mary realizes that her temporary return to Ireland does little to alleviate her isolation. The land is welcoming. but her people are still cold and unforgiving. the memory of Mary's bygone former transgressions forever green. A chastened Mary acknowledges:

> There is no magic, no homecoming, no handshake, no loving cup. Ah, my little scallywags, you have separateness thrust upon you.
>
> And still the journey is not without its come-hithers, not without challenge, not without incentive.... Does it have to be made? And then a terrible fever takes hold of me and I go on unwittingly as if to the sound of bugles, though very often it is to the sound of curs. The very flowers of the field get inside my head and the blossom that hangs from the hedges, and I

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> talk to them. to the herds. to the humans. and heady onto the thought of the warm inn and the wheaten bread and maybe an ascension (115).

Hope has not yet been fully extinguished in the soul of Mary Hooligan. She envisions the possibility of ascension. but is dogged still by an ambivalence towards her mother and her entire Irish experience. Her parting monologue is a litany of farewells to memories that threaten to invade her sleeping and waking hours. the struggle of the conscious with the unconscious for supremacy:

> *Au revoir*. Boss and Lil and all soulmates. go fuck yourselves. I have been saddled long enough. It is time for memory to expire.
>
> Gladly. too gladly I go. I refuse to touch my favorite surfaces. or to say anything in the way of a bardic farewell. The harp that once through Tara's halls is silenced. mute. No doubt the time will come when I will think of here with liking.... the one little room where I sat and heard the impending silence, the tiniest stirs, and lived, though marginally. most sweet, most wholesome hours (117).

I HARDLY KNEW YOU

However, memory of mothers has certainly not expired for O'Brien's protagonists. Nora, the middle-aged art restorer of

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I Hardly Knew You, is awaiting sentencing for the murder of Hart, her young lover, and her son's best friend. She struggles constantly with her role as mother and daughter. Here O'Brien juxtaposes the unconditional love Nora has for her son against the debilitating relationship she has with her Irish mother. As in *Night*, the first-person narrator's life story is revealed in retrospect. Very early in the novel we are given glimpses of Nora's profound resentments. Murder has been in her heart for some time:

> We will come to my crime and the madness of it, but what preceded it was much madder. 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 suffering mother whose insides I visualised as a bowl of surping and usurping blood (10).

As Nora attempts to examine her true experiences without even "unvoiced censure" she allows hope to surface temporarily and exclaims in Joycean fashion :

> I even feel that everything will be favourable. In such moments I exclaim, I say--I understand all, I forgive all, I see all, I even face the future with equanimity, and then it's gone,... (22).

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"My mother's letter is the most pitiful of all "(28), she claims as she relates how the delivery of her own letter to her mother was the occasion of a dog's death. Nora had sent her photograph and received the following response:

> ...We are all well here and life is as usual, only the day I got your photograph didn't the postman kill one of our Wicklow dogs so you see we are not lucky with them, but thank God it is only the dogs. We must not complain. You promised to let me know what the little gift for Christmas can be. Don't refuse me as it wouldn't be Christmas if I didn't send some little thing. In the spring you will come to see us. I'm looking forward a lot to it--that's fine but then there is the going away. Isn't life full of sadness. My undying love to you (29-30).

This letter reveals some of the basic differences between Nora and her mother. The mother speaks in banalities. She reveals little about her true feelings; her passive acceptance of the dog's death as of little consequence enables her to change the subject readily and speak of the giving of "small gifts." Nora, on the other hand, a nature-lover, like all of O'Brien's females, is stricken at the dog's death, and is not emotionally able to consider gifts. At least she needs to mourn a little first. The quality of her mother's "undying love" is the last thing she needs at that moment.

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As she talks to her barrister about her case, hope springs in her breast again as she considers women's authentic experience:

> I asked him if he thought women hope more fulsomely than men but he did not reply. I think they do. I think their wombs seem to gush hope despite several jolts and kicking. I think he thought I was bonkers. I consider myself sane compared to some of my neighbours, my former neighbours strictly speaking (30).

She endeavors to purge her Irish past from her thoughts, but the idea that the seeds of her deep sorrow were sown there continues to gnaw at her. The responsibility for her present predicament must be shared:

> At times I am fair and do admit that I must pay for this death. At other times I rage and hit this wall and say I have been paying for crimes all my life, ones that I did not commit, the sins of my fathers, et cetera. Then again I say that to kill him--loving him as I did--constituted the truest and most perfect of sacrifices. They'll reach for their Bibles for that(37).

While Nora traces much of her lack of gumption to her Irish Catholic upbringing, particularly citing her mother's culpability, she is also forced to admit how she as a mother herself exhibited

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similar behavior when her ex-husband Jude chastised their little son. The memory of her own inadequacy tortures her:

> Once at a point-to-point two garrulous ladies gave him [the son] glacier mints which he accepted. but his father discovering it made him spit them out onto the upchurned field. Then he was locked into the car as a real punishment. I did nothing. He says he forgives me but I doubt it. I would say he was disappointed and rightly so in my lack of gumption (44).

As Nora's marriage to Jude deteriorates. and he accuses her of having severed her last rights as a mother (49). she is overwhelmed with thoughts of escape. Her one terror is the possible loss of her son. However. even the tremendous attachment to the son is no match for the all-consuming need to shed the restraints of repression and bolt. which she eventually does. For a short time. Motherhood is defeated by Selfhood.

Later. Nora recalls another failed relationship with Dee, a married man. While on holiday with him in Cornwall, hoping to consummate their relationship, the protagonist's terror of intimacy erupts, and the same urgency to escape suffocation returns. She realizes she must shed her inhibitions and let her soul breathe:

> I decided to walk along the beach for health's sake, and to kill

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> time. Something unexpected met my eyes. In a way it was untoward. Down there, the universe was a gauze of white. It was as if the gods had fashioned it, so eerie, so threaded and dense was it. I had a sudden mad message to peel off my clothes and run like a maenad through it, to free myself. Shoes, stockings, black tunic and long black skirt were all peeled off and flung. I ran and ran, and hollered and hollered, and felt pain in my windpipe that was soon followed by a sense of space as if it were a channel for any oddment to pass through. I ran towards the next village though I could not see its street lights, but I could guess its direction. Freedom, recklessness these were the feelings may soul craved (52).

However, freedom and recklessness are considered indulgences and the soul's escape is short-lived.

Back to her current situation, Nora's barrister suggests that Hart, the boy she had murdered, may have attacked her, rendering her self-defense justifiable. Even in this desperate situation Nora clings to some inner integrity, and determines to search for the truth of her experience regardless of the consequence:

> He [the barrister] placed the thought in me that Hart may have attacked me and that I may have killed him in self-defense. But I cannot lie... I cannot... Yet I may have to lie. He keeps saying to leave it to him. There is no knowing what I may do. But I never will forgive myself if I lie (59).

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Nora knows that if she sacrifices the truth, she will never be the same. However, she also knows that women sacrifice the truth of their experience every day just to stay alive, and she also might have to. The death of Hart, like the death of Mary's mother, Lil, in *Night*, still haunts the sleeping and waking hours of the protagonist. She anguishes over the pain the whole spectacle will cause her son. Yet she acknowledges how he has learned to adapt to catastrophe much better than she:

> And I knew he had absorbed something that I was still striving for. He had learnt the inevitable: "What's done is done, what's dead is dead." Yet he knew too that nothing is utterly dead and the departed leave us an invisible gong that can strike at any moment (66).

Nora, like Mary Hooligan, in long interior monologues, continues to recall her mother's influence. As Nora remembers a black salesman once flirting with her, who had said, "Oooba dooba," she immediately associates this with the paradox of her mother's slavish devotion to religion, and her unabashed prejudices. Nora recognizes the absurdity of her mother's flawed philosophy:

> 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

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> missionaries have converted will be strolling around walking in the gardens. sitting on the deck chairs. using cups and goblets. availing themselves of baths and lavatories if there are such amenities there. I reckon she puts veils on them, white. all-enveloping veils (70).

Nora realizes that her mother was incapable of thinking for herself. She was unaware of the inconsistencies and contradictions in the doctrine she followed so religiously. On the one hand she mouths the platitudes of brotherly love: on the other hand those brothers better be white. Catholic and preferably Irish. Evidently, according to her warped philosophy, Jesus and the saints are exceptions to the rule. and no foreigners or "savages" need apply to corrupt her vision of heaven.

Again Nora recalls some of the lessons she imbibed at her mother's knee, and internalizes much of her mother's squeamishness:

> The smell of drink turned her [mother's] stomach, as did childbirth, black magic and hearsay concerning couples who met in the woods. In fact all forms of cavort sickened her stomach. She and I were happy only on those rare days when we were alone and her husband was being weaned off the drink by temperate monks who led him around a close, reciting prayers in order to receive a plenary indulgence, and

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> the faith to turn over a new leaf. She and I would clean the house from top to bottom.... 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. But her sin in her eyes and her sin in my eyes are a matter for dispute. I have never really tackled her and my mind bends under the weight of accusations not voiced. She went to him. her butcher husband. she went on command. She who objected to intimacy. She appears to have known no pleasure and perhaps given none. Pleasure. That incendiary word (73).

The burden of "accusations not voiced" continues to weigh on Nora's mind as we get a closer look at her deep resentment of her mother's passivity. and her failure to rail against the incredible brutality of her life. which we realize the seat of Nora's own psychosis. She finally tackles her mother. if only on a psychological level. At least she thinks she is confronting her demons:

> I tried to cast her off but it was not easy and it was not possible. It was as if she'd already lodged in me, was interred in me and she is interred in me now. Creature. I would think of occasional random things like gathering crab apples with her, or the way she scoured a saucepan, or clapped her hands together to imprison a fly, or the one time I saw her succumb. Those thoughts, or rather those images would not quit me. Perhaps I did not want to be rid of her. Yet I did want. It was like the step of a dance that I ached to master but could not.

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> And each time stumbled afresh.... Yet it was *her* crippledom that prevented me. I re-enact it now (74).

Nora is close now to full disclosure about her mother. She is finally articulating the extent of the mother's burden, witnessed, and to a large degree internalized by Nora in a combination of pity, anger, and guilt. How could a young sensitive girl remain psychologically unscathed in such circumstances? After acknowledging the pity, Nora must come to grips with the hugeness of her anger towards her mother's acquiescence. She must move towards the conscious utterance of a hidden unsavory truth, a truth that she has briefly alluded to before, but not allowed to linger. As images of her father's abuse of her mother saturate her consciousness, the urge to assign reasons for her present condition becomes so powerful that the emotional floodgates open, and all the pent-up bile gushes forth:

> Have I not lived day and night wanting to kill the father who sired me the father scion of all fathers, who soiled my mother's bed, tore her apart, crushed her and made her a vassal. Was I not sucked down into her darkest chambers, the witness and nursemaid of her mental and physical hemorrhaging. Did she not implore me to save her from this vale of woe? As if I were able. I think she has confiscated my

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> lungs too. I think that she is in full possession of my respiratory system. As it happens she is raving now. In the death throes, so she will never be able to give her appalled and fertile disapproval to my deed. She will not know that I have paid in her chosen coin for one of life's little sweetmeats-- that I am condemned. I would pity her only if I did not have to pity her.... Can I say that I forgive her? No. A resounding no. But come to think of it have I not always wanted to kill her too? Oh my God I have said it. She whom I loved like a litany, she to whom I said secular prayers, the features of whose face I have carried before me like a medallion, like an image of beauty, an image of hope, the guarantee of love, the shield, the buffer between me and all that is wicked and all that dies and all that rots. What ferocity. What we demand of mothers. Except that we do. The moment that she sensed in me an affection for another she was serpent-like (77-78).

Finally, the mother-demon that had haunted and plagued Nora has been confronted, but not yet exorcized. She acknowledges the unrealistic demands children make of mothers, and the unwavering loyalty mothers expect in return.

After this powerful emotional outburst, Nora allows herself some restorative memories. "It was as if I had suspended pain, loneliness, and dread...as if these things were behind me" (99). She recalls a trip to Tuscany, where again she finds herself stranded.

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Nevertheless, when she tours the town in the company of a young boy (a surrogate son), she is drawn to the magic and serenity the sunny place affords her psyche. Again, we see the motif of the closed church and the underlying conflict within Nora between nature, and the religion of her mother:

> The square was deserted save for a few cars and the houses like little palaces guarded the vast cathedral in the centre. It was one of those beguiling moments which cause one to say "I could live here," or "I will end my days here"; moments when when it seems that the cares that bind us will pass, our shackles will turn into streamers, moments when even to ourselves we appear to walk on air, proud pirouettes impelled by the most propitious of gods.
>
> We climbed the flight of steps that was dizzying in order to enter the cathedral and to light candles, perhaps to light candles for our separate intentions. But the iron-studded door was closed, and though we made some foolish attempt at knocking we were much more exhilarated by the thought of a grappa than the possibility of entering God's house (111).

However, Nora knows that she is still disconnected, and by hiding out in another country she cannot escape her emptiness within. Her emotional baggage travels with her wherever she goes. While the sunny climate of Tuscany soothes her, it does not fill the void:

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> I had the conviction that I could stay there indefinitely, that those trees, and the way they swayed, or the way they unswayed, that the dog and the various other dogs whom I could hear but not see, that the hens and cypresses were my guardians, that by hiding there I could forget cities, forget insult, forget fear, even forget Jude, forget the hollowness of life. It is strange that though I loved the country and had daydreams about clay, about orchards, about things being planted, I lived in the city and saw things such as raspberries or lettuces in the shops far removed from their source, as I believed I was.... But we have voices in us, how do we know which ones to obey? (112-113)

It is obvious that again O'Brien's heroine fails to find her true voice. She knows that the pastoral setting offers balm to her battered spirit. However, she identifies with the lettuces removed from their sources. Her own alienation has rendered her rootless, doomed to live a marginal life, a permanent outsider. Nora has not found her authentic voice, but she has begun to associate her female predicament with some paintings of madonnas she had seen in Florence. She reads in them the universal image of passive women. They all lead back to the passive mother image whose ghost she cannot shake:

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> I wonder if I could learn a lesson from those paintings that I saw in Florence. The very essence of their stillness, their inscrutability. They were faces that never disclosed what they had known, what they had seen, or what they had felt. They were like the faces of people who are mere witnesses of their own predicament, who have gone outside it and are bearing it without a cry, or a whimper or a moan, even without a smile.... Oh God I'm going to break down. I'm going to scream. I'm going to rail against God and man. I'm going to curse the womb that carried and later bore me, and the bottle that gave me suck (121-122).

An alienated Nora, far from the unwelcoming breast of her mother, has been teetering on the brink of madness for some time, yet still keeps her true reactions to her experiences from her barrister, and makes no effort whatsoever to defend herself. Her pluckless stance is reinforced when she recalls rabbits who exhibit similar timidity. For Nora, they seem to epitomize all passive beings:

> He opened the lids of the coops and pushed the bundles of grass in, and as he did the rabbits became petrified and withdrew into the distantest corners. Their timidity disgusted me, the way they did not even grapple with their food, but obviously would wait until it was dark again so that they could nibble and chew and then shit to their unilluminated unspunky little heart's content. I even wondered if they would

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> distinguish between the flavor of the grass and that of the flowers and that of the herbs. It was the epitome of depression and I wished that I had never seen it (125).

Even as Nora seeks help for the psychological problems. caused by her strict Catholic upbringing. her mother's suffocating influence and her terrible marriage to Jude. she finds no way out. The ensuing rage and murder become inevitable steps in her descent into madness. We see the stirrings of insanity in her recollections of her sessions with her physician. Dr. Rat:

> Cite Dr. Rat. renowned Dr. Rat to whom I went for a cure. In my mind there was a doctor somewhere who would carry out an examination on me. make me say Aah. or even Ninety-nine. see the dilemma and. within minutes prescribe a miracle, a simple organic miracle. Except he served poisons. I drank mine and swiftly felt the world turn into a spinning top. He assumed the properties of a rat. I could not hold him. Nor did he want to be held. Those hours, those bad hours brought the hair standing on my head, made the goose flesh crawl while I was hurtled down, down, down, into the troughs of horror. with the devils to direct and make mock of my plight. The walls purred with a black viscous blood, and the spheres through which I had to pass were lit by the same bloodied flame. There were no doors, no way out. Yet I had to get out, or die, or choke, and out I did get only to be dragged back again, back into the swirling sphere, and again and again with no respite, just the demons and the pits of

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> blood and the horrifying despair. Above all a helplessness, and one that I still feel when I remember that there was no exit and that one came into the world only to be drawn back again, willy-nilly into the deep. That it would not end. Sweating and squealing. Dr. Rat smiling a weird, Asiatic smile. Amused perhaps at the degree to which one human being, one simpleton, can be lost, damned, and consigned to bloodied eclipse. As helpless as spermatozoa. It was most valuable. I saw the rat people there and knew that I would know them forever (130-131).

Nora has been to Hell and back, and while her bitterness still simmers, she has at least learned to recognize the enemy. Drug induced stupors condoned by Doctor Rat, a representative of the medical profession, have hindered rather than helped her recovery. Nora is in need of spiritual and psychological redemption, a laying on of hands, not drug influenced nightmares.

Back in Scotland, where the murder of Hart takes place, we find Nora still trying to *see* her experience in a different light with deeper clarity:

> Anyhow the light was different. We perhaps never see what we are seeing, and never cease to try to resee until our brains are bursting with a variety of impressions about a thing that is no longer possible to confront (156).

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At this point in the novel, Nora is either unwilling or unable to confront her mother or her dead lover. Her ambivalence increases. When she finally recalls the murder act, it is intertwined with anger and contempt for her parents, and for her lover. His fit during their lovemaking terrified her so much that all the pent-up fear, terror and rage combine in one insane moment when she snaps, and she suffocates Hart. Nora is not yet ready to assume responsibility for the act. Later, the full impact of her crime begins to dawn on her:

> All the dread I have ever dreaded began to take hold of me. It was like some terrible prophecy on the verge of coming true. I had lost whatever it is in this world I had sought to gain--peace of mind maybe (200).

As Nora's last thoughts border on hope, she struggles to articulate her true feelings. Aware that her upbringing has denied her the right to be her true *self* without the threat of censure or ostracism, she endeavors to articulate her psychological confusion:

> Even then I was hard put to it to admit that I had done wrong because of not being able to face it, because of my full self, my sensible self being absent from the deed, from the involuntary deed. It was as if it had been done in sleep except that I was awake (203).

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Again the protagonist feels an intense sense of loss. Demons have been confronted, but not exorcized fully, and the climate for female inhibition remains. The mother-daughter conflict has been examined, but not resolved. O'Brien must have felt she had exhausted it in *I Hardly Knew You*, considering there were no novels from her for eleven years.

TIME AND TIDE

In *Time and Tide* the cudgels are taken up again, and the conflict resumes. However, this novel examines the primal undertow of motherhood from two prospectives. The protagonist Nell, an editor, has to deal both with her feelings towards her Irish mother, and Nell's feelings towards her two sons, Tristan and Paddy. Again, there is the familiar bad marriage in the background, and the divorced woman trying to raise children with very limited emotional support. Like *I Hardly Knew You* and *Night*, this novel is also a first-person retrospective narrative. Its theme is how the alienation or loss of children reaps devastating effects on mothers.

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Nell. like Nora. comes from an Irish background. marries Walter. a man of whom her family disapproves. and lives in England--a familiar O'Brien situation. We learn from the prologue. that her son. Paddy. has been drowned in the Thames. and Nell is estranged from her remaining son, Tristan. A zombie-like Nell has been trying to snap out of her emotional paralysis and piece her shattered shell of a life together again. She tries to examine when her sorrows first began. It is here she immediately recalls her relationships with her husband and her mother. Some of the intense bitterness we saw in previous protagonists. has been mollified to some degree. but resentment and overwhelming fear of life remain. Nell is powerless in the face of her authoritarian husband, and her clinging. dominating mother. Before the disintegration of her unhappy marriage, we find examples of Nell's untenable situation:

> Nell thought of these things now as she heard Walter moving around in his study, the music as usual pouring forth. She felt powerless; she was afraid of him, just as she was afraid of her neighbor, afraid of everyone. She was too frightened to tackle him, to ask what had gone wrong, even to ask him to put the music a bit lower. Her children were her only friends; she clung to them, indulged them, let them get away with murder--they had biscuits at all hours and were allowed to keep torches under their beds and to make treehouses out in the common,

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> which was forbidden. To say she loved them was inadequate: she needed them. they were her sustenance (22).

In Nell we recognize the same tendency to smother her children with affection and use them as a surrogate spouse as Nora's mother had displayed in *I Hardly Knew You.* The emotional transference has perpetuated itself. Nell does not fully understand yet. the suffocating effects of such connections on children.

When Nell's mother is apprised of the broken marriage. she wastes no time in dictating terms to her daughter. Nell had expected a warm consoling letter. Instead. she receives a diatribe:

> Her mother said that it was no surprise. that it had been crystal-clear for all to see. that even the most casual caller could tell how bitter and loveless the marriage was; then she dilated on every failing of his,... Her mother was asking her to make some vows concerning that future. She was to kneel down as she read the words, kneel wherever she happened to be, and swear on her oath that she would never touch an alcoholic drink as long as she lived and, more importantly, that she would never have to do with any man in body or soul.... This woman, my mother, is not my mother, because she has no pity; this is a mother who is made of stone (45-46).

Psychologically, Nell wants to abandon her biological mother who offers her no emotional support, and reverts to the platitudes of

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respectability. She is less interested in her daughter's spiritual and emotional problems, than she is in promulgating her own warped doctrine of repentance and self-denial. Her admonition to shun men no doubt stemming from her own unhappy union with a brutal husband. Misery loves company. Nell's mother is actually happy about the breakup of her daughter's marriage. Mother had been right about her unsuitable husband all along. However, as her mother revels, the daughter writhes in her emotional pain. There is no one to turn to for comfort. Back in a position of power in her daughter's life once more, Nell's mother starts pressuring her about the children's religious training:

> Her mother sent dire warnings about the disgrace of divorce and repeated her constant anxiety about the children growing up in a pagan land (55).

Walter refuses to let the estranged Nell have custody of her sons until after a long legal battle. Without support, Nell has been abandoned to her own resources. She has had to struggle to support herself, but her brain never lets go of her dilemma:

> She was like a dog with a bone, and she used to say, "One day I'll bury this bone forever." On her thirty-third birthday, she wrote in her diary: "Stasis"(58).

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In desperation for someone to talk to who would listen to her problems without being judgmental. Nell turns to a maternal gypsy woman she meets at a market. This character strongly resembles Catalina's old grandmother in *The High Road.* Nell has finally won her children back. and has just moved into a small rented Victorian house bordering the river. and is furnishing it with odds and ends from the market:

> That first Saturday they went to the lane where the gypsies had stalls. to get bits and pieces. She bought a barrel for wood and stacked it with jugs. cups and saucers. a soup tureen. a cutlery box. and odd glasses. including some beautiful cranberry ones.... One of the luxuries was a lamp with a milky glass stem. inside which a mermaid was suspended. The woman who served her gave her a lace runner for luck.
>
> "You take care of those little chaps and forget all about *him*. the woman said with certain archness. She was a large. strong-featured woman with gold flecks in her eyes, and it being winter. she wore a woolen shawl over her shoulders.... She told fortunes, said she would be able to tell Nell's at the end of the day.... "I think I'll leave it," she [Nell] said, too frightened to hear about either past or future, because she was living in this frozen haze, like the mermaid in her sphere of glass (65-66).

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As Nell's relationship with the gypsy woman develops, she contrasts it to her encounters with her birth mother, who had helped her financially, but not emotionally. Her mother had helped her with money until, as she said, she "got going." Her mother constantly sends packages of tablecloths and cakes and sweetmeats to Nell and her sons, but there is always the censuring voice, trying to control from afar, throwing Nell into a constant state of guilt. Nell grows thinner, appears emaciated, adopts a severe hairstyle, and lives a lonely life. "It was as if I wanted to look like that, to atone" (66).

Nell's guilt increases when she realizes that her parents had to sell cattle to send the money to help her move. The letters from Ireland are full of hardship, death and woe, "the ties deepening with each bulletin"(66). The financial obligations to her mother make in increasingly difficult for the adult Nell to extricate herself from emotional bondage to her. While she needs the financial support, its acceptance necessitates tolerance of the endless sermons on Nell's behavior. To keep her sanity, Nell moves closer emotionally to the gypsy who sympathizes without moralizing:

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> "I'll come back to see you one day," she whispered to the gypsy woman.
> "I'd like to help you," the woman said. She meant it. There was something compassionate, something rooted, and Nell felt teary, missing the mother she had not had, who like the approaching man would vivify her dreams (67).

Nell still looks for someone outside of herself to resurrect her life. She remains dependent on outside forces for fulfillment. She is not enlightened enough to realize Anne Sexton's claim, in her poem "Housewife": "A woman *is* her mother / That's the main thing" (quoted in Heilbrun, 1979: 176).

This estrangement between mother and child continues as Nell recalls her disillusionment with her religion. On a trip to Arezzo with her sons, she notices the Virgins in the paintings, and identifies with their aloneness:

> Virgins pale, pensive, limpid: others round-cheeked, saucy wenches, some in filmy raiment, others in sumptuous attire: sublimely immersed in motherhood, one even going so far as to kneel in adoration in front of her little sausage-like son, who lay naked on a red velvet dais. Paddy and Tristan turned away in the chapel on the hill, where they had journeyed to see yet another of these Virgins, this time a pregnant one.... She could not see in the face of the pregnant Virgin in the dim light, but she saw the stance, which was sturdy, and the gash

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> in her gown along the belly, a presage of the knife-like pain to come. She saw an aloneness, too, mother and child familiar yet distant, estranged from one another (89).

Nell experiences a religious epiphany--a revelation at odds with her mother's teaching. Nell now sees differently. It is the sudden shock of recognition:

> Suddenly the paint seemed to spatter and those beautiful enamel surfaces seemed to dissolve also, while her mind, the mind that had so unquestioningly--at least in a sacred precinct--had believed in the purity of saints, now saw otherwise, as if all was amok, yielding to the hot and ravening passions within. It was something in Sheba's mien, a deference made all the more tantalising by the excruciating formality, the decorous stoop, by the gravity in King Solomon's eyes, black like his beard and the underbrim of his wide black hat, but in both the frontiers of shame falling away as they yielded, without stirring, to the lasciviousness within. For a moment the tiles under her feet went liquid, her limbs too, all dissolving, as the words came from somewhere, but where?-- "Your groove a pomegranate grove" answered with "My love thrust his hand into the hole and my innards seethed there." She thought, Once long ago, I have lived this selfsame moment, this swoon, and thought how everything is known at birth, the lather of our begetting known, then forgotten, blotted out (89).

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However, the revelation in the church, where human desire is shamelessly acknowledged, is short-lived. When Nell purchases some postcards and scrutinizes them in a restaurant, the old shame quickly returns:

> In the restaurant at the corner she ate salad and fish without knowing what she was eating and studied the postcards she had bought of the Virgins, wondering if the sitters had been virgins or mothers or fallen women and her swoon of earlier, in front of Sheba, filled her with scalding shame. Perhaps they had noticed, had been hovering (91).

Nell's repression continues to weigh heavily on her mind. Wherever she goes she recognizes signs of female subservience. On a trip to Morocco, where her assignation with lover Duncan fails to materialize because his passport has expired, Nell is once again stranded. She observes the local women:

> The narrow streets were crammed with men, men picking their steps between the puddles, their shins bare and bony as they raised their garbs. Veiled women stood behind trestle tables, selling things, mostly dates, brown, off-brown, and caramel-coloured dates, a host of flies on each batch. Occasionally one of the women shook a plastic rattle to disperse them; from there they gathered on a neighbouring box of dates, only to disperse again at the sight of a customer.

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> Everywhere there was a hunger, a fasting in the eyes, and a knowledge that this fasting would not end (129).

Disappointed at the receipt of Duncan's telegram announcing his cancellation of their rendezvous, a shaken Nell seeks help from the hotel staff to help her pack and leave for the airport, she finds little sympathy:

> She read, and looked at the girl, thinking that from the heat and this news she was going to faint. What time did the coach leave for the airport? was what she heard herself ask in two languages.
>
> "Soon, madam, soon," the girl said and was gone.
>
> Taking another towel and her clothes, she ran after her, to catch up with her to beg her to help her pack, because in this state she would not be able to do it herself. Instead, she found another young girl who wore a white apron and cap and was obviously from the kitchen, and of her now she begged, showing such dementia that the girl looked at her with slight shame, a shame that said, "You are not a woman... you must bear your pain in silence, in reserve... the way we bear ours" (132).

A demented Nell flees the hotel, but in her flight belittles her own weakness. What had driven her to be so dependent on others for her fulfillment? She admits her own emotional shortcomings, and declares her inability to cope alone:

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> She slunk into the back of the empty coach and on the journey now saw barren earth, thorn strewn with flocks of goats and sheep like skeletons from the Old Testament, and women bent over their weeding as if they had dropped from their mother's wombs unto the very parched stretches of land that all their lives they would be tied to. How could she weep at the loss of a lover? She hated such weakness. It was as if she had learned nothing and still believed in transubstantiation through another (133).

As Nell fails to connect with Duncan, because he found her too needy, she drifts "like someone immobilized" (136). She is close to a nervous breakdown, and her dreams are of her childhood where she loses her brain:

> The auguries were bad. There was her dream, for instance, simple, breathtakingly simple. In the dream she was a little girl endeavouring to walk or run herself out of existence, through meadow, marsh, and bog towards the horizon, beyond the edge of the world, into where she designated heaven. Heaven. She was on her way to school in the dream, satchel braced across her shoulders, all the familiar sights--stone walls, gates, milk pails, cabbage heads turquoise and mottled with slug holes, the near and not so near barking of dogs, and the voices of people saluting or growling at each other. It happened just beyond the old workhouse, her brain came tumbling out of her skull and landed on the roadside next to a clump of dock leaf, a small grey shirring thing. People converged to look at it, to speculate on what it was. Some

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> thought it was a spinning top and soon they began to dance on it, great clodhopping footsteps and yodels of mirth. She could hear its whirr, because although she was brainless, one strand of thinking was left to her, mindful of the calamity that was happening. At moments the brain, endeavouring to escape the stampede, the hobnailed boots, and so forth, flew up in the air, spiraled, but someone caught it, some pair of hands collared it and returned it from the rustic frolic. The dream told her everything and yet she ignored it (139-140).

Nell knows that most of her inability to cope with life's problems originated in her childhood, but like O'Brien's other protagonists, Mary Hooligan and Nora, she dreads a knock-down drag-out confrontation with her mother, who was a major contributor to her malaise.

In her ill-fated relationships with men she seems determined to punish herself. "Not once did she admit that what she sought was her own ruin. Not once do we admit" (142). Knowing full well that she is emotionally and spiritually crippled, she seeks psychological help from a doctor who "had replaced Duncan or the need for a Duncan in her affections ." He turns out to be Dr. Rat again, who had treated Nora in similar circumstances in *I Hardly Knew You.* The doctor gives her mood-altering drugs, which plunge

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Nell into a terrifying delirium. Her experience with the doctor parallels those of Nora:

> Watching him pour it, she felt that she could still save herself, yet, like nectar she took it, drank it back, believing she would be spared. It was not long before it began to work. A lurch, inside her brain, as if blood were either being poured into it or tapped from it, or both.
> "Doctor," she called, but the words came out in a splutter. Then she looked up and saw that he had become a rat; he was Dr. Rat, perched on her velvet prayer chair, his bristles bristling rhythmically, the face however still human, the white features like a papier mache mask above the furry tuxedo....Prayers and curses in an awful conjunction shot out of her, but were not heard.... Her sight had gone, too, the eyes full of a viscous stuff, so that like a blind person she put her hands out to fumble for her bearings.... "Bring me back...bring me back," she howled. He paid no heed.... She was to breathe. Did he not see that she was submerged in this swamp and that breathing did not come into it?... She was going down, down into the deeper circles of it, it now becoming a hell, the flames fluctuating between flame and blood, so that she was roasting one minute and freezing the next.... She could taste blood, just as she could taste fire; her mother's maybe, or her mother's mother's, or a more distant matrix....
>
> "Go away...go away," she said to herself, and then a greater swoon took hold of her and she went into a deeper chasm, calling on God, shouting God's name, cursing God for her mad mad history (143-144).

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After attacking all the influences that have contributed to her paranoia, Nell returns to sanity. She had been delirious for five and a half hours. "Am I over it?" she asked feebly. "I think so," he said. However, Nell is far from over her problems. Ragged and vulnerable, she is like a child who needs nurturing, a shell of a woman in fragments still clinging to the hope that some other human being, even Dr.Rat could save her:

> She longed to be in the country in a meadow, the swards warm and high, someone beside her, cradling, cradling her. It was all she wanted. If he had held her, she would not be in fragments now (146).

Nell's recovery is gradual. While acutely aware of having "lost my marbles," she is not yet rational when she finally decides to put off the inevitable no longer. She intends to write to her mother a long overdue letter which will finally clear the air. It is an advance in Nell's psychological growth, but it is laced with hurt, anger, and accusation. It resembles the contents of the protagonist's letter in *Casualties of Peace.*

O'Brien has now allowed the protagonist to face unsavory truths, and allowed the reader to read them for the first time. A

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homesick young Nell has been staying unhappily with relatives and misses her mother. She is too shy to ask for a stamp to write. The cousins tease and taunt her about her country accent, and imitate her snivels, then they relent and take Nell on a bicycle ride:

> "I want to go home!" I would say.
> "I want to home!" they would say.
> As a result of having been so cruel to me, a bicycle outing was proposed as a sop. One of the girls--there were three in all--one of them suggested that some evening she and I go to the outskirts of the city on an expedition. They did, you see, try to be pleasant on occasion, to make up for having been so sarcastic and so mocking, and hence the bicycle ride, a perilous passage through busy streets, to the outskirts to look at bungalows, pebble-dashed bungalows, named after seas and rivers and cities in Italy and so forth, ordinary abodes with ordinary gates and chip-stone paths, and she remarking from time to time how pretty it all was.... From time to time she would ask very sweetly if I was enjoying myself. She could be sweet, they all could be when they wanted to, but one never knew when that would be. It was there it happened. I felt the saddle damp, but there was no rain, and then I felt my legs damp and thought I had wet myself from the fear, what with the cars and buses and lorries that roared past us. Luckily, she dismounted. I thought it was to crack another egg, but no, it was a breather, and also for me to see the electricity plant that had been recently installed. Presently I found out. To stand and look at this electricity installation was one of the stupidest things I could have imagined, since we knew nothing about it,

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but for me it was a chance to investigate the dampness. I slipped my hand under my frock. brought out the fingers. and saw blood.

"Jesus. blood!" I roared. She saw it and couldn't believe that I didn't know what it signified. that you hadn't told me. prepared me. couldn't understand the hysteria. Oh. it was real hysteria. I wouldn't move. I stood, legs glued together. to try and stop this awful flow. and looking at the saddle. I vowed that I would not get on it for anyone or any thing, not even her. who I knew would bully me.

First she resorted to kindness, solicitude. said that we go home and get napkins. the shop ones, not the ones you use. but I refused, repeating that I would not budge from there. Then she tried to be sensible, said it was natural. a big moment. and that I was a woman now. Again she wondered why you had not told me. I had of course seen your napkins in the bowls of water, put there to soak, the water blood red, like the oil in the sanctuary lamp. but otherwise carnal. I did not know what gave them that hue, what butchery had gone on.

So there we were beholding a ridiculous electricity station, two or three miles from the centre of the city. and I simply refusing to mount the bicycle again and she talking twenty to the dozen now, imploring. I was not afraid of her. I was beyond fear or, rather had entered into a penumbra of fear from which there was no escape. I believed the blood was flowing, flowing wildly and weirdly out of me, and that if I moved the flow would lead to death, my own death and a memory, oh yes, a memory-death or something long before that had to do with blood, to do with you and me. It came to

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> me that you did not have the heart to bear me, and it has come to me now. These things are incontestable, the source of our wisdom, the quick of our pain. There is always another, a darker secret beneath the surface of the secret we unearth. God speaks in strange ways, does he not? I wait for you. You (148-149).

Young Nell had been severely traumatized because of her mother's prudish reluctance to explain the biological facts of life to her daughter. The adult Nell impulsively mails this letter, and immediately regrets it. She "posted the letter, regretting it even as she was doing it, yet exalting in the realization that this would sever them forever."

As Nell cavorts briefly with Boris, in another botched affair, she hears echoes of "As you sow, ye are like to reap" from the "woman to whom the mad, irate letter had been sent" (154). Within days, she learns of her mother's death. When she is told that her mother's heart gave out, she immediately shoulders the guilt. "I killed her," Nell said, but there was no one to overhear it" (166).

Nell hastens to Ireland, as much to retrieve the letter as to attend her mother's funeral. She spends several anxious days ransacking her mother's meager belongings desperately trying to

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retrieve the letter. Her father, annoyed at her restlessness, complains:

> "Can't you sit?" Her father said, seeing her stir.
>
> "She's looking for her darling mother," Maisie said, to keep the peace. She believed that if she could find the letter she would know by the way it was folded or crumpled if it had killed her mother. Also, she clung to straws. Perhaps her mother did not understand it, perhaps it was too high-falutin' or the writing was illegible, vowels and consonants slithering off the page, like knitting coming off a needle. She did not remember signing it, so that it could have come from anyone. She did not remember posting it, but post it she had, afterwards went to a midnight shop and flung herself at Boris slattern-wise. This was the dissolute side her children did not know, must not know (172).

As the search for the letter continues, an ambivalent Nell admits that her impulsively written missive had groped for the truth of her childhood trauma:

> In the dresser she found pots of jam and apple jelly with mould on them and letters of hers, earlier letters, pinched, discreet. In its way the other letter had groped for the truth. But who wants truth?...Perhaps it was upstairs. Opening the hot press she let out a scream as she caught sight of an animal, a baby fox, that looked at her before vanishing and by its glare said, "You have killed your mother...you have slaughtered her" (173-174).

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As Nell forages in the garbage for fragments of the letter, she realizes that even she is not ready for full unadorned truth. She is still emotionally "a child masquerading as a grownup" (175). The letter is never found. Nell leaves her sulking father, who had urged her to stay and care for him, and returns to her sons in England. A mirror breaks symbolically as she leaves:

> It fell because the cord was brown and rotted, but occurring, as it did that night, and with their minds centered on death, the shattering had an extra terrifying significance. Maisie went to pick the shards up, laid them on the table with solemnity, as if the mirror, too were a corpse, and said with some semblance of cheer, "I'll glue it together."
>
> By their eyes they told one another that the haunting had begun--three people united by the selfsame fear and separated by starker ones too terrible to admit (176).

The cords of communion have been broken between Nell and her parents. Nell spends many of her upcoming days trying to pick up the shards. We never find out what the fears too terrible to admit are.

As she returns to England to try to heal the growing estrangement with her sons and her unresolved guilt over her mother, she is close to another breakdown. She tries to push

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thoughts out of her mind. She becomes involved with Boris and his German girlfriend. Olga. who had taken advantage of her hospitality having used her house while she was away. Olga had inadvertently left the gas on. and when Nell returned and attempted to light the oven. it exploded in her face. She is badly burned. and has to be hospitalized to have the fragments of glass removed. Again she endeavors to avoid dealing with the truth. Thinking is dangerous now:

> She did many things to avoid thinking. stamped on each thought like stamping flies. Any thing not to break down. She would look at the trees. the slide. the rosebushes in the back gardens. bags of fertiliser, wheelbarrows, the humble impedimenta of suburbia. and think, I am on the mend... I am on the mend. The surgeon had been extra kind to her because of her dementia. After the operation she had screamed, could not be quieted as two nurses held her and one clamped a hand over her mouth, saying crisply that patients far worse than she, patients who were dying would be unnerved by the hullabaloo. They sent for the surgeon, thinking perhaps he would be more severe.... He sat with her, talked with her in a low voice, and asked her what was it, what was it. At first she could not tell him, because to say it would be to relive it again, but gradually she described in a waking vision she had just been home, yes home up the avenue,...and how in the doorway she was met by a man in livery, who admitted her. In the vestibule she saw the most beautiful collection of robes laid out for a ceremony,

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> scarlet. wine-coloured. with gold epaulettes. emblems of sovereignty: yet when she lifted one. she saw a severed head and next to it another. both freshly hacked. dripping. so that she dropped the garments and ran from the carnage. but running was no use. because she knew that these were her own people mauled and ritually sacrificed (188-189).

Nell does not realize the significance of her dream. which the doctor dismisses as the aftermath of anaesthesia. Nevertheless. important symbols are evident. She might still be losing her head. but so were those who once had sovereignty over her. perhaps religious leaders in ceremonial robes. her parents. and her countrymen. She is part of the ritual sacrifice. What she does not yet admit is the real sacrifice is her true voice, which she dreads to express. Ironically. the one thing she fears the most, utterance of gut truths. is the one thing that might save her. However, anger and murder have not been purged from her heart, nor has the attending guilt. Despite her terror, Nell permits the doctor to force her into a more cheerful mood.

Yet, Nell cannot indefinitely postpone thinking, and eventually she moves towards a semblance of reconciliation with her dead mother. She writes a final letter:

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> "Dear Mother," she began again. "There are moments in which you appear tender, like a snapshot melting, tinged with beauty and grace, imparting the same vague sorrow as when one sees an old man or a young child at a farmhouse, staring, the child waving but not sure if the wave is seen and losing heart in the middle of it. You would come down from the yard, your hands smeared with meal, a few eggs in a can, but never enough; they would be dunged and covered in meal and the one above all others that I remember is the shell-less egg, soft as any placenta, its bruisedness a resemblance of us. If only we could have imagined ourselves into each other's depths. If only!
> She folded it again and again, thinking she would go back one time covertly and leave it on the grave, a shredded flower (191).

Nell, while still yearning to connect, is incapable of dealing with both the truth of experience, and the reality of exterior pressures at the same time. She worries that her sons will notice in her the strain of keeping up appearances. She refuses to reveal to them her deep problems with her mother. However, while over-protecting them, she also shuts them out of her confidence. She knows, as her mother did, that children observe more than they ever reveal. Ironically, the insincerity for which she castigates her mother, Nell herself perpetuates:

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> They would probably see a change in her, some aging perhaps, some aftermath of shock, but they would not say so, they would put it away for a future time, the way we do when young, put away what we must later look at, a look that often appals us; it is as if our eyes are flung into a bath of bleach and henceforth stripped of every soft solacing image (194-195).

Nell's problems with her sons multiply. Her eldest son, Paddy, appears to have inherited his mother's depression, and experiments with drugs. At one point, he attempts suicide. Later, he is drowned in the Thames when a pleasure boat and a tug collide. Tristan, her second son, also grows distant, and decides to move in with Paddy's pregnant girlfriend, Penny. Nell, the doting mother, is forced to let go:

> This was a big moment, the moment to let him go; all other moments were rehearsals for this. She did nothing. Sat there stone silent, looking at ornaments she had given them that were put out of reach, until he stood up and said, "I'd better go down and see what's what."
>
> Scurried out he did. A child. Inconceivable. Yet conceived. Something as ineradicable as that. A child and her place in this world usurped. Thinking it, she felt a poison course through her body, brown and off-brown, like water in a clogged ravine. She thought of a day, oh a distant day, years before, when her mother chastising her, consuming her--had

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> in her wild assault burst a sack while gutting a chicken: the poison was of that selfsame colour. tobacco colour. and the selfsame pervading stench. Thinking those things. she thought too. what pretty names we give to the carnivorousness that is called mother (301).

At last she has identified not only with her own mother. but with mothers universally. All mothers consume their young to some degree. even Mother Ireland whom Joyce has described as an old sow who ate her farrow.

In the closing chapters of the novel. as Nell flounders in her grief. having lost her son. she makes her way back to the old gypsy woman. who had earlier functioned as a surrogate mother. Feeling emotionally fragile, and vulnerable. she reaches out for comfort:

> Afterwards, long afterwards. it all fell so quiet and so dazed, and she was exhausted as she apologised to the gypsy for having kept her late, for having made her miss her usual train, and now her son or her daughter would be fretting.
>
> "I've kept you," she said, her voice as tired as her brain. I like the city at night... It's the one thing I miss... funny, I miss it," the gypsy said, and then they both got up. There was a stall of clocks, gold, brass, ormulu, tortoiseshell, all telling a different time. She looked at one and another and another. It could be yesterday, could be then it could be now, it could be before he died, it could be when he lived, it could be tomorrow... or never.

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> "I'll never be right," she said, and looked at a glass dome, inside which was a skeleton clock, the organs so nicely, so perfectly at work, the sunburst pendulum about to give utterance, left right, right left, the little hammer hammering mightily.
>
> "You will," the gypsy said, but in a quashed voice (312).

However, Nell, like Yeats, knows the folly of being comforted. She knows she must make peace within herself. She reconciles with Tristan, but the closeness has gone: she wrestles alone with her grief, and soberly embraces the silence:

> In the stillness there was a silence, but there was no word for that yet because it was so new: pale sanctuary devoid at last of all consolation.
>
> "You can bear it," the silence said, because that is all there is, this now that then, this present that past, this life this death, and the involuntary shudder that keeps reminding us we are alive (326).

Nell has been through the emotional wringer, and only just survived, but her voice has been muted, and kept within herself. She is still stifled, passive and enduring, in the emotional wasteland where no birds sing.

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DOWN BY THE RIVER

In O'Brien's most recent work, *Down By the River*, the author presents her most poignant heroine yet. This novel is a definite change in theme over all her other work. For the first time, she tackles the controversial topics of incest and abortion. It is as though she had been denying the impulse to write such a brutal novel for some years, and on one level it is a courageous undertaking. On the other hand, the atrocities depicted in it are excruciatingly difficult to handle. The impetus for the novel was no doubt gleaned from recent headlines in Ireland, claiming that a teenage rape victim had not only been denied an abortion in Ireland, but also prevented from leaving the country to obtain one in England.

Mary McNamara the thirteen year old protagonist of *Down By the River* is victimized on several levels. The same passive, ineffectual mother prevails, but she is a shadowy presence whose death early in the novel leaves the girl rootless, and floundering. We are left to examine the reactions of the other females in the girl's life.

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From the beginning, we are given furtive glimpses of Mary's situation. She is sullenly accompanying her father to the bog when we realize it is not an innocent father-daughter stroll:

> He asked her to try and guess what those daytrippers might have eaten .
>
> "Oh...Anything...Hard-boiled eggs...Potatoes."
>
> "And after the spuds, comes the strawberries," he says and starts then to feel the stuff of her dress, pinching the bodice underneath it. In the instance of his doing it, she thought she had always known that it would happen, or that it had happened, this, a re-enactment of a petrified time. To impede him she stood up and made fidgety bustly movements, remarking that they had better be getting back, pretending not to notice the snapping of the elastic... Not a sound of a bird. An empty place, a place cut off from every place else and her body too, the knowing part of her body getting separated from what was happening down there.
>
> It does not hurt if you say it does not hurt. It does not hurt if you say it is not you....An eternity of time, then a shout, a chink of light, the ground easing back up, gorse prickles on her scalp and nothing ever the same again and a feeling as of having half-died (3-4).

Immediately after the rape, the daughter is stifled by the father's warnings not to tell her mother. She knows she will somehow be held responsible for the violation, as was the young protagonist in *A Pagan Place*. Mary has numbed herself and has

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mentally disassociated herself from the attack. Her father scrutinizes her, waiting for a reaction:

> He looked at her, a probing look, looked through her as if she were parchment and then half-laughed.
>
> "What would your mother say...dirty little thing....."
>
> She [Mary] does not know what has happened. And there is no one that she can ask....Climbing the roped rickety gate that led from the bog road to the outer road she wobbles, grips a tassel of flowering dock and the coral seeds crushed to threads she puts in her pocket. Only they will know. No one else will ever know.
>
> Except that they will (5).

Already we have a glimpse of Mary's society, where a young girl can be sexually abused by her father, while the mother's implied disgust of sex closes the avenue of communication for the daughter leaving her no one to turn to in her predicament. She is forced into silent acceptance by puritan conventions which fail to provide a means of escape, or even a platform for the articulation of abuse. Mary pathetically turns to Nature for a brief respite as most O'Brien females do. In a sorry indictment of society the raped daughter is made to feel that she can only confide her terror and desperation to a few crushed seeds.

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Mary is riddled with guilt, and her religion is of no help, it only exacerbates her shame. She wonders if the sin is evident to those who know her, and speculates in her anguish:

> She did not look at Our Lady. Only Our Lady knew. Maybe her mother knew. Maybe. Tara knew. Maybe the teacher that she liked knew, maybe that was why she was so abrupt. She would never have a boyfriend. "I'll never have a boyfriend, ever" (7).

From Mary's innocent point of view, she mourns the fact that she will probably be no longer worthy of anyone's love. She knows little about the facts of life, and like young Nell in *Time and Tide*, she has been kept in such ignorance about her body that she is rendered unfit to defend herself from abusers of her innocence. Mary has no means to assess the extent of the outrage perpetrated against her.

Apparently her father has a history of wife abuse, and when the girl hears fierce roaring from downstairs, she assumes her father is on the warpath, but is mistaken:

> She cannot hear the exact words but that is of no matter, she waits only for the sound of things crashing and then the silence, the pounding silence which always follows when her mother has fallen on the floor or unto a chair. Yet there is

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> neither the falling or the silence, just the anger crackling and spewing.
>
> Sometime later her mother came up to report. Her father had caught some boys raiding the orchard....
>
> "I was in stitches," her mother said.
>
> "I thought he was shouting at you," Mary said.
>
> Her mother went on laughing. A strange brittle laughter. She did not like her mother then.
>
> You can think more than one thing about the same person at exactly the same time. You can think oodles of things and they are all different and they are all true. Her mother was a plantation of evening foliage and evening flowers, lush and copious, dark red dahlias; her mother was a bit of stone wall with stained-glass windows that no one could see through; her mother was the Chinese lady in the picture with the dagger in her hair and pursed knowing lips, her mother was the woman who sat on the table when that doctor came and made free with her, was allowed to swing her legs, then feel her calves, then slip off her shoes and she being told in a strained voice to go off and play. You can think more than one thing about a person at the same time and they are all true, but one thing seems to be truer; the clandestine thing (8-9).

As Mary acknowledges her ambivalence towards her mother, she also expresses her anger that her mother has not been close enough to know when her daughter is silently asking for help. The girl is close to revelation because of vexation, but is not quite angry

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enough yet. "She almost told then. she was almost ready to tell it then because of being vexed" (10).

Mary takes up running. hoping to run her dilemma out of existence. and at the same time escape the continued advances of her father. She also begins to have fits. and refuses to talk to anyone. Her mother still fails to probe deeper to find out what really ails her daughter. She is too scared to admit the real cause. Meanwhile Mary continues to live in constant anxiety and shame. "It is like that. Everything and everyone is liable to attack her. She is a leper" (12).

She soon refuses to receive Holy Communion, but knows the priest will soon suspect something after a couple of weeks and come to her house or the school. She wants help, but does not know how to ask for it. Who will believe she has not encouraged what has happened to her?

As the violations continue, Mary withdraws into her own world of psychic isolation. Instead of moving towards her mother, Bridget, for protection, Mary tries to avoid her at all costs:

> The fits had already started . They came and went but intensified the moment she saw her mother, her mother asking, what, what.... Nothing could drag a word out of her,

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> not threats, not coaxing not their kneeling down and whispering. Her tongue was gone. It lay there like the tongue of an old shoe. It was stiff and defiled. Her tongue had become the enemy (28-29).

Finally, a lady doctor is called in to syringe Mary's ears, since her reluctance to speak is blamed on deafness. However, parents and friends appear both deaf and blind to Mary's plight. The doctor has discovered something else amiss as she voices her concern to Mrs. McNamara:

> "She doesn't know yet, Bridget," the lady doctor said then, lingering on her mother's name in a show of solicitude.
> "Nothing."
> "Sometimes the mind just clamps up," and her voice trails away, admitting to feeling bested....
> Their voices hushed and raised by turn, their disgust, their simmer, their vicious threats all come to the same thing, the same non-thing. They are pretenders to one another. No one looks anyone in the eye lest they betray themselves. In the sockets of the eyes different densities of dread. They know without knowing (29).

They all know that Mary has been sexually molested, but no one actually says anything or does anything to investigate the circumstances. The conspiracy of silence continues as the young

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girl's psychological turmoil is revealed in her nightmare, which she confides to Olwyn, an old tinker lady shunned by the townspeople:

> There was a big fire, all colours but mainly orange. I don't know who'd lit it. Maybe me. The axe was brand new, like the ones in the fairy tale, the blade silvery. It did the work of its own accord. It had only to be told which bit to hack off and it did it. It was a man that was being cut. The pieces were on the floor. They were laid out like vestments. His eyes wouldn't shut, not even when a pendulum was swung back and forth. They were like the sheep's head's eyes in a saucepan, big and glassy. They stared. It was a new tongs and it was easy to lever the bits into the fire. He got roasted, his legs first, then his shoulders, then his other parts. The head was the last. The head took a long long time. It didn't want to burn. It got a griddle in the end' (30).

Mary's subconscious mind is trying to deal with the violation that her passive conscious mind cannot. The attack on the self fights back brutally in the dream. The symbolism in the dream is obvious, and is reminiscent of Nell's head-severed dream in *Time and Tide.* The same undercurrents of violence, terror and frustration are apparent.

Olwyn, guessing the girl's attacker is probably her own father, promises to keep the girl's confidence, but advises Bridget to send the girl away. Bridget objects, but Olwyn persists:

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> Her mother does not like being told this and her objections are strenuous and twofold. one is money and the other is that Mary is all they have.
> "It would break her father's heart to see her go."
> "Then hearts are going to break." Olwyn said. conceding that of course no one could forecast anything. only God. God knew how the wind blows. or the embryo fares in the womb of a woman (31).

Mary is sent to board at a convent school. She is still in denial. and is happy for a while thinking she has been offered a new beginning. "No one touched her. She would become pure. Her other life had begun. Her other life finished the day she left home" (32). While in the convent she hears from her mother who inquires little about Mary's welfare. but staunchly defends her husband:

> We miss you. I went down by the river to cry as I did not want your father to see me crying. Your father is not hard-boiled, I want you to remember that (33).

In the temporary haven of the convent Mary excels academically, and considers joining the order. Like the young protagonist in *A Pagan Place* any refuge is better than home. However, her repressed trauma, and her fear of the consequences of

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her perceived sin go unvoiced in her response to her mother's letter. Again there is no real communication between the two:

> Mary wrote back each Saturday but the words were stilted. She did not know what to say. No one was saying the thing which was most in their hearts. No one. Not her mother. Not her father. Not Sister Aquinas either, Sister Aquinas was sometimes curt, made fun of her in front of other girls because she asked to be excused from drill. They thought she was a spoilsport. But it was not that. She was trying to have no body, to elude it (34).

Down by the river where Bridget goes to think and to cry, we find that she too lives in guarded isolation. "There is no one to talk to. There never was"(37). The doctor, who had provided rare furtive sexual diversion in her empty kitchen, " had been sent away, far away, struck off the register. No one knew why" (37).

Bridget is dying of cancer, but the disease is not named. Her superstition about receiving two nightdresses is enough to give her a premonition of her own death. In a moment of rare solicitude for Mary, she reveals her fears to Betty, a well-to-do neighbor who lives in the big house. However, like Mary, she is also close-mouthed about her real misgivings and never gets to the point:

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"If anything happens to me, Betty, will you look after Mary, will you promise that?"

"Why should anything happen to you."

"You think I'm mad but in the past week two people sent me nightdresses... one a woman I haven't heard from in years and the other is a relative in Dublin."

"And what's so wrong with that?"

"They are dressing me, I think, maybe for the next world."

"Come in, you're drenched...I have a good fire on."

"No I won't."

The things she has come to say are too confused and too loathsome. Or has she just come to talk around them, like a hen going around a bush before it lays.

Either way she does not go in. She is better alone with the river or with her fowl (38).

Bridget, like her daughter, has no outlet for her fears, which are apparently, too disturbing to voice, and must turn to nature. Mary has the seeds, Bridget the river or the fowl. Her life is now driven by shame.

Instead of going home for Christmas, Mary decides to spend the holiday with her new friend Chrissie and her mother. She is alienated by their coldness, and misses her own mother. She ponders over a line from her mother's note:

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> "God grant I'll see you some time again." She sat in a corner and read it to herself and felt a most terrible pity for her mother and pity for her father too and shame in herself for not having gone home (41).

Mary's emotional ties to her parents are still strong. Nevertheless, she adjusts well to convent life, develops a friendship with Sister Aquinas, whose attitude towards Mary fluctuates, moving from curt to friendly; Mary begins to help her in the kitchen on Sundays. In her search for maternal approval, she moves closer to the nun. Sister Aquinas has become her idol. The friendship is doomed by circumstance. "Mary did not know, could not know, that she would not see her idol again"(48).

As Bridget's physical condition deteriorates, and she is hospitalized, she asks for her daughter as religious doubts envelop her:

> "When is Mary coming?" She asked again.
> "Tomorrow."
> "Will I last?"
> "Of course you'll last."
> She drew back then, the breathing stertorous, the eyes both glittering and fading, saying it was a hard thing but she was beginning to doubt God. Then the words came out in a tumble, like food being thrown back (50).

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Bridget shares the ward with three other patients. In her last delirious moments she asks them to join her in song, but is refused:

> "Why don't we sing a song," she said to her companions. "You sing."
>
> "I haven't a good voice...keep me company," she said but they refused and so she launched into song herself, her voice quavery, a little hint of reproach in he eyes for their refusing her. It was a song about October winds, lamenting around empty castle doors...
>
> Suddenly water begins to issue from her, a great cathartic gush, as if the placenta has broken and a child is coming out but they know that it augurs death, something in her colouring, the sudden cancellation of her voice, the body heaving, sinking down, down, unto the floor and Patsy [another patient] calling the nurse....The doctor has arrived. Prayers are being said for the dead (51).

Bridget dies of ovarian cancer without ever knowing the name of her illness. He husband had been told of the disease, and had "balked at it, seemed unable to let it sink in"(49). We learn later that Bridget's last hope was that Mary would accompany her on her eternal trip; she had not seen her daughter since she left for the convent.

When Mary is given this information at her mother's funeral, it is too disturbing in its implications for the girl to tolerate. Again

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her father exploits the system which permits him to manipulate the girl. In the presence of the mourners, who lavish sympathy on him, her father pleads with her to stay. Caught up in the neighborly pressure, and in her father's emotional blackmail, a cowed Mary agrees to stay home temporarily:

> "Don't, Dad... Don't drink," and she rushes to him in a wild, pleading desperation.
>
> "I won't drink, if you promise me something." His half drunk eyes swilling up in childish expression. She knows what it will be and yet a gasp escapes from her when he says it, when he pronounces it. Her death sentence.
>
> "Will you stay home for a few months and mind your father."
>
> Each and every face is looking at her now, straining, suspenseful, certain that she will not, that she could not refuse a cry such as that. Their eyes swimming around her. She nods then, a mute assent and in gratitude he puts one hand around her neck, lops it around her neck, then with his mouth unscrews the bottle top, drinks from it and spits it out ...
>
> She ran out then through the hall door and shouted and prayed into the driving rain, and asked that it not be so, that the promise she had made she could be absolved from, that one of them would stand up and say "she can come with us" and kneeling on the hard gravel, she prayed for that, then thought of Gethsemane and of the Savior having to drink the cup of pain.

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> They came and hugged her in a further bathos of sentiment, saying "Don't grieve love...Your Mammy is safe in heaven...And you're still a family..."
>
> Only Lizzie knew why she was crying. Lizzie had done washing, Lizzie had seen things (53-54).

Mary knew from Nurse Boland, who had been with her mother at the end, that she had died struggling to get something out, "something that mattered and even when her tongue and her speech had failed her she had tried to convey it with her gums, her spittle" (52). However, the inarticulate Bridget does manage to leave a nest egg for Mary of five hundred pounds she had squirreled away over the years. An innocent and generous Mary offers the nurse half of it, but the nurse refuses. "No it's yours, your birthright" (52).

Mary, in turmoil over the promise her father has coerced from her, and still emotionally attached to her mother, visits the undertakers to view her mother's body for the last time, and to ask permission to be released from the promise:

> ...and the coffin lid aslant against the window, a tall stern onlooker. For a moment its bulk had made the room dimmer and then her eyes adjusted and Mary let out a little shriek when she saw her mother's expression, a more alive than dead

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> determining in it. There was a snarl at the corner of her mouth, her upper lip raised in a helpless grotesque curl. She wanted to put her hand there and press the two lips together but she was afraid. Her mother had striven to speak unfinished words. And she, she now would not be able to say that which she had come to say.... She had loved her mother too much and not enough. Both. And in the end she had withheld love and now she was ashamed (56).

Mary realizes that her mother died having no real voice in her own destiny. She died frustrated, with a "snarl" on her lips, with important things left unsaid. This terror and pity for her mother defuses Mary's resentment and anger and leaves her alone to cope with her dilemma. While in this state of shame and confusion, Mary observes her father's tenderness as he helps deliver a foal. She is touched by this gentler side of him, and in a weak moment throws away her inheritance, her financial means to escape. She does not fully realize that one tender scene does not cancel out the brutal treatment to which she has been subjected:

> The absolute and instantaneous rapport with the animal, so tender and true such as he had never shown her nor her mother or possibly anyone. She thinks then if she could be a child, maybe if she can be truly a child and make her needs known, he can feel as a father and then in a lunatic impulse to

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> make that come true she throws away the one thing in the world that might have been her independence.
>
> "You know you said that you wanted to get a tombstone for Mam...Well. I have a bit of money."
>
> "I want your mother to have as good a grave as anyone, a better grave." he says.
>
> "I'll give you the money," she says.
>
> "You're the best girl," he says and pats her as a moment before he had patted the animal (63).

As Bridget is buried, and they select a tombstone, the mother-daughter conflict is also put to rest. O'Brien has just let the theme run its course. She may have finished with mothers, but the actions of other females are scrutinized, and Mary's problems are far from over.

Lizzie, her neighbor, who had helped her mother, and who now does the washing for Mary and James, her father, knows more than she reveals. When she learns that Mary has been sent home from school sick, and is alone with her father, she is concerned. To avoid another attack by her father, Mary bolts. She sees Lizzie in the fields with their laundry, and runs towards her.

> She ran to her until their faces were quite close and then said, "Lizzie," but in a voice which conveyed everything.

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> "The divil...The ringing divil." Lizzie said then mashed her lips because of the words which had escaped her (66).

Lizzie is suspicious, but has no positive proof of James' abuse of his daughter. She takes Mary on a pilgrimage to a shrine of the Virgin (probably Knock), where they are to place their petitions at a the statue of the Virgin, and drink the muddy waters of the holy well. In an act of betrayal, Lizzie snatches Mary's confidential petition, and reads it. "Please cure my father's epilepsy," Mary had written. Lizzie nodded, "said that God would understand, that it was in code, and that it meant something else"(69).

Even in the confidential note, Mary cannot relate her true experience. Lizzie assures her that in nine days (the duration of a novena) her troubles will be over. A hope and a prayer are all the help Lizzie is prepared to offer.

Lorna, a social worker, calls to see James about Mary's absences from school, but gets no answer. James refuses to open the door. She peers through the window, and leaves a note. James dodges her, and waits for his friend Jacko to arrive. Linda has parked nearby. James leaves Jacko to deal with the social worker.

Linda has received an anonymous phone call in a woman's

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voice (perhaps Lizzie) "saying something funny was going on in that house, a man and his daughter alone, things not quite right" (72). Jacko tells Linda, what he believes to be true, that Mary is in a convent. James passes them recklessly in Jacko's car, which he cannot drive properly. Jacko hops in and they head off to Jacko's mountain retreat. The social worker finds out nothing.

Later, Tara, Mary's friend with whom she has been staying, pester's Mary for her dead mother's velvet jacket to wear to a disco that they both plan to attend while her father is away. Mary is reluctant to go back to the house. Tara waits at the gate. "Her father seemed to materialize as from nowhere like a fork of fire..." (82), and commences to violate her again. After another brutal attack, Mary is bathed in shame:

> ...she felt she would always feel this shame, a shame lurching into sorrow...
>
> The hooting of the car from down at the gate seems so far away it could be another world. It is another world. Her mind cold. Like a little skull. And like a skull, empty of everything. "I will not put myself together again. It is broken now. That which was is gone." She lay on her face and bit. And bit...
>
> "Go to your disco," he says, throwing a note and coins along the floor, then picks his clothes up and goes out.

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> In the morning what the sun caught were the score marks of her teeth. and the little pink pulpings of sawdust on the rosewood rungs of the chaise (85).

Still unable to confide in anyone. Mary plans to run away. She cajoles some money from her father for a school trip. She collars him while at a cattle market where he furiously fires some notes at her. She begs a ride from the owner and son of traveling shop. They agree to drop her off at a wool shop and Mary is finally in Galway city. several miles from home.

After several days of practically living on the streets. and dining exclusively on lemon pancakes. her money is running out. She is befriended by Luke. a hippie musician. He is scruffy. and unconventional but is sensitive and generous to Mary. He allows her to stay in his room and sleep. He has his own problems. and is mourning the loss of his girlfriend who had abandoned him.

Mary enjoys her city refuge, and begins to romanticize Luke as the prince who has been sent to rescue her from damnation. She writes him a letter asking if she can stay with him longer, and revealing for the first time some of her fears:

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> Dear Luke.
>
> I have something huge to ask you. I know it's awful but I think I am going to be a mother and I am afraid. Could I stay here a little while. I won't be in your way. I promise. Probably you have a girlfriend in some other country. up north maybe or in Glasgow or in London. so it is not that I am asking. It's just to be let hide. Every person has to have one best friend and once they have that they are flying it.... I lied about my age. I told you I was older because I would like to be. It would be better if I was. I never felt young. Never.... I will go to a doctor soon. The person's whose it is is the last person's it should be. I would rather not say, ever.... I would like to live in the city because if you scream someone can hear you (98).

In this crushing indictment of Irish society we find a young sexually abused girl with absolutely no outlet within her own society. She is forced to turn to a compassionate male stranger in her desperation. Even that refuge is assailed with the arrival of Mary-Lou, an old friend of Luke's who suffers from a bone disease. She makes very clear her long-standing attraction to Luke, and in no uncertain terms tells Mary to skedaddle. A naive Mary still does not quite understand:

> "Do you mind if I ask you something."
> "No"
> "Are you sick too?"

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"No."

"You look sick. You're not sick good... So I can ask it, you see I want to talk to Luke alone... It's about my being sick... It's about my disease...I can't talk to him out here on the street... It has to be in this room with the lights out and the candle... Are you getting me."

"Yes."

"So maybe, cherie, you could go to the movies... There's one about a shark... Supposed to be terrific."

"How long have I to stay out for?"

"Oh, honey," Mary-Lou said and looked at her with scorn as if she should know better, then coated her lips with salve and puckered them.

"Could you give him this," Mary says, handing her the letter she had written all morning.

"Oh, honey... I hope you're not getting any ideas," she says, takes it, looks at it, then tosses it into a nearby chair (100-101).

Again a female has failed to help the girl. As Mary wanders around a shopping centre she is hauled off by the Guards. Apparently, every station has been searching for her. Sympathy and the law are still with her father. Nonetheless, Mary still says nothing.

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In one of the most brutal chapters of the novel. Mary is returned to he father's care. He is enraged at the publicity her disappearance has engaged. and asks angrily:

> Why did she run away. Answer. Answer. Nothing to run away from. Disgracing her father like that. This hobo. this tinker [Luke] with his tinker's instrument. he would have him put behind bars. He would have this tinker prosecuted for abducting her.
>
> "Nothing happened...Nothing bad happened." (104).

Mary. frantic to save herself from her father's wrath. and to defend her friend Luke. finally lashes out at her father:

> ...and as he pulls the cardigan from her she hears herself shouting crazily. zanily. incriminatingly. that she is going to have a baby. and she knows when it happened.
>
> "Liar." he says...
>
> "You were having no baby when you ran away and if you're having one now it's that tinker's."
>
> "It's not the tinker's, she says and threatens the guards on him (105).

At last Mary seems to have mustered up the courage to confront her father. However, as the implications of Mary's threat begin to penetrate, he flies into a violent rage, and grabs a broom handle:

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> "I'll make short work of it," he said, grabbing the broken and splintered broom handle which might have been waiting for this grotesque rite.
>
> She lands in a basket of turf mould, his legs the stirrups that hold her out. Thrusting it inside her the whirling of it in exact ratio to his crazed words, his intent far exceeding anything the implement could do, because in truth he did not know what he was doing, fear and delirium having engulfed him. He was simply making certain to push it inside and wind and rewind it, and almost at once she could hear her inside slushing, like an over-full bucket....
>
> "It's happening... It's happening," she said and by the way she repeated it he ceased, pulled the thing out and holding it at arm's length like some poisonous totem he went off to bury it.
>
> She lay there, half gone, her mind a semi-nothingness and saw the soft moonlight splash and dapple unto the table and across the floor and make bright stripes on Shep's black coat, Shep a few feet from her, like a person, feeling it all, prehensile, there for her. There (106).

Mary's only comfort is Shep, the dog whose presence seems to bear witness to her anguish. Again, she contemplates suicide, and makes her way down to the river. "It was the best thing, the only thing. It had not gone. It had outlived his scourging, clung, limpet-like" (107). Mary drinks something to give her courage, but is terrified of meeting her disapproving mother in the other world.

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Betty Crowe, their wealthy neighbor from the big house is out for a walk in the woods with Angus, her dog. The dog sniffs out a distressed Mary, who is dragged out of the water by Betty and taken to her sumptuous home. Betty endeavors to contact James, but he has taken off. She considers Mary's rescue as a sign that her own dead husband had not deliberately drowned:

> "I knew he wouldn't do that to me. It was an accident and for fifteen years I've prayed for a sign and now it has come, you are that sign tonight...."
>
> "Is there something wrong with you." She stands just outside the bathroom door trying not to sound too strained.
>
> "I don't know."
>
> "Could there be?"
>
> "I don't know."
>
> "Mary, you have no mother, think of me as a mother over this."
>
> "She'd kill me, she would."
>
> "Have you had a period"
>
> "Yes."
>
> "When?"
>
> "A while back"
>
> "How long back?"
>
> "I'm not sure."
>
> "Oh Mary...We do have to do something...Fast."
>
> "What...What can we do fast?" and the terror in the face reflected in the mirror is not that of a little girl at all but an

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> animal, animal eyes staring out from the noose of an iron trap (112).

Betty takes Mary to Dr. Tom Fogarty for an examination which confirms the pregnancy. Mary tells him she went down to the river to die. She is stalling, still thinking of a way to run away again. When Mary refuses to discuss her condition, Dr. Tom asks if Betty knows who the father might be:

> "Didn't she give you any idea?"
>
> "No, she clamped up. Johnny Belinda time.. Once it didn't go blue." And handing her the bottle, labeled and slightly warm, he says, "You'll need your cheque book for this, Bet."
>
> "There'll be hell at home... Her father is a very heated man," Betty says.
>
> "Rosaries and ovaries, I don't know which does the most damage to this country. And to me" (116).

Betty continues to prod Mary for details. Mary says it happened the night of the disco, and Tara was a witness. When Mary admits that her attacker is an older man, Betty is disgusted and plans to contact James when she can locate him. Mary says she will tell him herself. She already senses Betty's withdrawal:

> "I'll tell him... I'll go home and tell him."

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> She is running now, the top half of her body running and spinning but her lower part like a mummy mummified. She is searching and hunting within herself for some other solution, some other person, some last avenue because Betty is in retreat now, she can tell from the spleen in her voice (118).

Mary, who had been gone for several days, some of which were spent at Tara's house, the last few at Betty's, must now explain her absence to her father. Desperate to run away to Dublin where she hopes to find refuge in "a home where distraught women could shelter"(120), which she had read about in one of Tara's magazines, Mary becomes cunning. She coaxes money for groceries from her father, and heads towards the store, and orders some things on credit. Mary almost confides in the pregnant shopkeeper. "But she doesn't, her tongue refuses to" (121). The shopkeeper offers chocolates to atone for the flowers she neglected to send when Bridget died. However, Mary has hardened, and asks for the money:

> "I'd rather the money," Mary says and the woman opens the till and takes out a note but somehow there is a chilliness in it.
>
> She cannot look up at the woman for shame, no more that she could look at herself, because she has turned beggar now (121).

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When her father falls breaks his leg and arm, Mary asserts herself, and insists that he be taken upstairs much to his displeasure. She feels safer downstairs where she ponders her plight, and tries to work out a plan of escape without being stopped by the Guards. She decides to go back to Betty:

> When Betty opens the hall door, she is in her nightgown and her hair is unkempt. There is no smile, no semblance of welcome because she knows why the girl has come and she wants no part in it....
>
> "There was no one else I could go to."
>
> "Have you told your father."
>
> "I can't tell him he'll kill me;" and then illogically she adds, "He has a broken leg and a broken arm."
>
> "What has that got to do with it," Betty says.
>
> "When I said my mother was better off dead I meant it," Mary says in reply.
>
> "What are you telling me, Mary."
>
> "That I can't tell him." And staring into the woman's face and beyond it to the inner person she adds, "It wouldn't be a right baby anyway... It would be a freak."
>
> "Why do you say that, Mary."
>
> "Will you bring me to England."
>
> "I'm not your parent...We're not even related"(125).

Betty reluctantly agrees to take Mary to England after she has

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consulted Dr. Tom. She takes Mary to a clinic where an abortion is arranged for the following morning. In England, Mary meets Mona, another pregnant Irish girl, older than Mary, but also awaiting an abortion. Mona explains how her boyfriend Gabriel had frantically worked to save the money to send her to England, as there was no way he was ready to be a father. Still, Mona "loved him to bits" (129). Both girls are terrified, but console each other:

> They felt very close then, Mary and her on account of feeling so alone and so afraid.
> "Look me up...We'll go on the razzle-dazzle," Mona said, managing a smile.
> "What's your name."
> "Mona...It's on the bit of paper... And you?"
> "Mary."
> "Jesus wept... We'll be a right pair... Me a dub and you a mucker... We'll paint the town...The dancing Queens" (130).

Meanwhile Nonie Burke, a nosey neighbor has been in Betty's house with Lizzie. In Betty's wastepaper basket she finds a clipping which read, "Unwanted pregnancy-confidential advice." She already pictures herself giving speeches, and people praising her for her brilliant detective work. In self-righteous indignation she calls on James. He claims that Mary is in Dublin shopping with Betty.

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He doesn't know how much Nonie really knows yet. Nonie, still puffed up with self-importance, goes to the Guards.

As Mary and Betty stay overnight in an English boarding house, Betty receives a phone call. It is from Dr. Tom telling her to get back immediately, as the whole country is looking for them. Betty tries to explain that everything is arranged for Mary:

> "She's having it first thing in the morning."
> "She is not having it first thing in the morning."
> "It's all fixed...The time...The theatre... The fee."
> "I'll go to gaol."
> "Don't be melodramatic."
> "Betty, you don't know the medical fraternity... they're under the thumbs of the bishops...If you don't come home I'm finished...My practice is finished... I have nine kids and another on the way."
> "I always thought you were a friend,' she says, suddenly stung by being told of another on the way."
> "I was a friend and you bloody well know it... You needed a friend, a lover and a doctor and I was all three to you, all three in one. That'll come out too... Every fecking thing will come out... All the dirty linen."
> "I'll never look myself in the eye again and I'll never look you in the eye again If I give in to this, If I fail her."
> "It's her or me...And I'm not loaded... I can't flash a cheque book."
> "Bastard," she said and put the phone down (142-143).

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Nevertheless, Betty does fail her, and on the plane on their return to Ireland, cautions the flight attendant not to let Mary stay in the bathroom as she was threatening to kill herself. "When the plane came to a standstill Betty reached for their coats and their eyes met, and they flinched, the flinch of traitors" (145).

In Ireland, the women have gathered like vultures. "Women are whispering, asking, waiting as they might for an apocalypse" (146). Nonie confers with Tara's mother. They start cross-examining Tara. The worst thing that could possibly happen is that she might no longer be a virgin. Her mother has found a sexually explicit magazine in her room. Like Bridget, Tara's mother Mrs. Minogue, has told her daughter nothing about the facts of life, and is outraged at the girl's curiosity about sex:

> "Filth."
> "I've done nothing...I really haven't."
> "Your friend Mary MacNamara has."
> "Is she dead, Mummy."
> "She would be better dead...She's having a baby."
> "Oh, Jesus...Oh, Mary," Tara says and repeatedly blesses herself."
> "When did she have her period?"
> "I don't know."
> "She bought Tampax...We both did and mascara."

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> "Have you a period?"
> "Of course, Mummy."
> "Stop your mummy. Are you sure?"
> "Where's Daddy, let him ask me."
> "This time, Tara Minogue, he will not save you...."
> "Oh please, please Mummy, don't show him that, it's just girls' talk... It's just trying to be grown up."
> "Did she confide in you, answer me."
> "No. No."
> "Did you know she was pregnant?"
> "She was sick but..."
> "But..."
> "I thought it was the stew, it's often gone off" 147-148).

As the interrogation continues Tara reveals nothing to her mother, but later silently remembers how a disheveled and bruised Mary had come to her the night of the disco. The silence of society works again to protect James, and vilify Mary.

Mrs. Minogue visits the head teacher of the school, denouncing Mary as a tramp. He regrets missing the signs that the girl was in trouble, and pleads for neighborly compassion. Mrs. Minogue is outraged:

> "She'll need all the friends she can find," he says gravely.

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> "She'll need watching," she says fiercely. What he saw beneath the outrage was the jealously of a thwarted woman seething over her own lost, never-ever tasted delight of being thirteen and fourteen and fifteen....
>
> "We will have to nurture her," he says.
>
> "Nurture her," she says, her fist mashing the stuff of her tweed pocket (150).

A group of women gather to greet Mary's return. They have taken it upon themselves to decide Mary and her baby's fate. Nonie, Tara's mother, her friend Dympna, Roisin, a zealous anti-abortionist, and Eilie. They all have their say, but no one asks what Mary wants. When one of them finally does, Mary says she wants to die. "We all love you to death," claims Eilie (152). However, Roisin is relentless in her self-righteous explanation of what Mary's obligations are. The girl becomes hysterical and has to be calmed down by the doctor. Roisin resents his intrusion:

> It became insufferable for Roisin to leave them alone and she hurried in, her eyes sweeping the room, she scoffed when she heard his soft bland words about hard choices and the usefulness of talking about suicide thoughts and even transposing them into pictures.
>
> "Rubbish," she said.
>
> "It's a very real option to a person who sees no way out," he says irked at her intrusion and her superiority.

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> "It's not your child," she said suddenly to Mary. "The way your tonsils are yours or your mane of hair."
>
> "It's not yours either," Mary said, the words a beautiful explosion that seemed to float out of her mouth and blacken the face that was only inches away (154).

Slowly Mary is being pushed to find her voice, but it only surfaces in intermittent sputters. Meanwhile, every television and radio station has zeroed in on her story; it has become a media circus. Dark-robed judges pontificate, as career politicians weigh the political ramifications of their involvement with the case. Mary's plight has become a *cause célèbre.* This upperclass commentary is in stark contrast to Mary's situation. She has been hospitalized, and is under constant observation. A court order is to be signed preventing Mary from leaving the country. As the lawyers and dignitaries dine in the luxury of their club it is obvious that nothing will change, but the patriarchy must have its say:

> At the high table Hugo studies the motto, a green cresting on a porcelain plate, "*Non mutare*—we shall not change." Differences of opinion arise at the sagacity of such a creed and Ronan, the young solicitor, his gown falling from his sloping figure, tells them that a guru whom his wife consults is of the opinion that change is the only stimulus for personal growth.

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> "They are all chancers... Those gurus." Donal said.
> "Now now." Martin chides him and says they are not to give the impression of being insular. East and West having much to teach each other (163).

Again there is little mercy for the wronged girl, as the men roll out the old Nationalist objections about the perception of women's behavior and the nation. They expound on how "The Attorney General had to act over some brat... Some little slut about to piss on the nation's breast"(167).

As Mary lies alone in a hospital bed, she is visited by a nurse who is a religious fanatic, who spits out accusatory phrases from the Bible and threatens Mary's life:

> "The serpent vilest of all the field animals tempted you, o serpent which tempted the first woman to eat of the fruit of the garden, we have found you. Wail oh Cyprus and wail oh Sebasha for an infant whose mother would slay it. Woe to her who treats with scorn the rock of salvation. Thou shalt be of unsound mind."
> From beyond the room they can hear voices and walking backwards she now hisses, "I have set before you life and death... Therefore choose life that you may live... I will know... I will know."
> Opening the door she hovered, the outflung arm a token of her returning (171).

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A terrified Mary waits for her own salvation. Meanwhile, Luke, who is a virgin, is hauled in by the law and charged with Mary's rape. "I've never touched a woman... Ever" (173) he pathetically explains to the crude Guards who berate him for his clothes and Bohemian lifestyle. They lie to him, and say that Mary implicated him. They deny him access to a toilet, trying to wear him down by making him feel shame:

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

Even the basically decent Luke is worn down by the system, and allows them to read Mary's letter. He has to clear his name. However, he is spiritually compromised by this betrayal:

> He is crying and he cannot stop.
>
> "Why are you crying," he says looking up at a famished star that had forgotten to pack in. He cannot answer. He cannot yet bring himself to say that he is crying not for what they had done to him, but for what he did by letting them read the girl's letter, and in the doing sullied himself (177).

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Mary hears from her father's cousin Veronica Lenihan, who has been appointed Mary's temporary guardian. The letter is warm and friendly, as she welcomes Mary into her home. They spend dreary days walking while Veronica crochets baby clothes. Again Mary is uncomfortable in her own skin, and even while taking a shower, refuses to look at her body:

> The shower was difficult to turn on but even harder to turn off. She never looked down at herself, her body was hateful, an alien. It didn't matter whether the water was boiling or freezing, she didn't care (180).

Veronica hovers over Mary, until the girl thinks she is going to suffocate. They live in isolation in a remote village miles from her home. Four women visit and present her ceremoniously with a pet goldfish in a bowl. The symbolism is obvious. As Mary listens to the chatter of the women, "She was thinking of the hectic moment when she would escape them" (183). Again they bombard her with pious platitudes, and predict a glorious wedding for her one day. Mary withdraws at the insincerity. Her experiences have endowed her with new insight:

> "I saw it just now...What you were wearing," the woman said once again. A wedding. A word. Another word like

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> death or truth or goldfish. She thought the words were the thing people used to suit their purpose, to stuff up the holes in themselves, to live lies, and that one day those words would be sucked out of them and they would have to be their empty speechless selves at last (184).

As they haggle over Irish names for the baby, "Siobhain or Maeve" Veronica grows harsher in her treatment of the girl:

> "Mary MacNamara, come here," Veronica said and, as had become a habit with her, she pulled on Mary's hair to chastise her, indignantly dropping the long, flecked ribs into the fire.
>
> Under her pillow there was a card. She was not sure which of them had gone up and left it. It said—"Please do not break your promise... Please do not kill an innocent baby"(185).

Mary is called "Magdalene" by the press, and people call into a popular radio show expressing their opinions. The people are divided. One man finally says, "Let her go to England if she wants...We'll be judged in the history books as a nation of Neanderthals"(187), but is quickly cut off. Mary too has been listening to this, and begs to be taken home to see her father. More immediate is her growing fear of Veronica:

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> "You're staying right here...We have your father's authority... I am your mother now... I am your surrogate mother." Veronica said, and from the drawer hauled out the letter which had given her that licence, that owning.
>
> She was afraid then of everything about Veronica, the high-pitched voice, the eyes that could mind-read, even afraid of the big black pleated skirt that took up one whole side of the armchair, armour, waiting for the powerful body to step into. Afraid (189).

Mary has found no real refuge with Veronica.

The media is pressing for a statement from James. Nonie, who has been his contact with the outside world, persuades him to consider making a statement. She reminds him, "You are a pillar of the community... You want that known. Printed." For Mary, Nonie feels nothing but contempt, and secretly "would like to see the girl flogged" (191). Nonie also reveals to James that Betty has explained to the press that her reason for taking Mary to England in the first place was because Mary had said the baby would be a freak. In an unguarded reply James tells Nonie, "there would be no freaks in his family, in his bloodline, and those who spoke such calumnies would swing for it" (192).

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While Veronica and Mary attend Church, and are lined up to receive Communion, Mary seizes the opportunity and runs away. She calls Hennessey, the radio show host, and is taken under his wing. Letters and money pour in. Groups carrying placards assemble outside Hennessey's house, where Mary is secluded. They intrude like vultures, all wanting a piece of her. She has become a commodity among special-interest groups. Roisin leads the flock; she wants Mary handed over. All the factions against Mary unite in one angry mob:

> The placards draped with rosaries carry pictures, mostly of the Virgin with "Save the Baby", except for one with the simulation of running blood and which reads "Thy sister's blood?"(197).

Hennessey, while well able to withstand the mob, has his own agenda. When a symbolic vase of lilies topples over staining his pleated shirt he mutters harshly to Mary. She registers his attack and retreats:

> "Damn, damn," he kept saying.
> "I'll wash it out," Mary said, rising to get a towel.
> "Oh, I'm not doing all this just for you," he says sharply and she feels it like a blow of a cudgel, cowers, then retreats to the corner of the room.

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> He relented quite soon and fetching a towel to rub at the stains, speaking to her, but without looking at her-- "I'm glad it's to me you came... Some of the others might not have been up to it, but I am... I love a good fight" (199).

Mary is taken to a "safer" house away from the media. She is taken to the home of Winifred Fitzsimmons. Mrs. Fitz confides:

> "We are all very angry at what's happened to you... Very angry and very sad," she says and turns then, to introduce Mary to Mrs. B. who has come in with a basket of clothing to be ironed.
>
> "This is Mrs. B... and she is our guardian angel " (207).

As Mr. and Mrs. Fitz excuse themselves to play badminton, Mary is left alone with Mrs. B. She tells Mary her medical history in long monologues, telling her she can come visit her in the mountains. She works for Mrs. Fitz two days a week:

> "When I come on Friday I'm going to bring a leaflet...It's a woman who's taken on the sufferings of Christ...Her hands and her feet bleed... I think it's the stigma it's called. She'll help you" (209).

Mary needs more than pamphlets. The media have been hounding James, who is still receiving countrywide sympathy as the distraught father. He has concocted his own fiction, which is being

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broadcast over the radio. Her father has allowed the media to read out a letter written by his priest who addresses Mary as :

> Dear little Magdalene. I call you that because I think it is a name you would not shy away from.... I can just imagine what you are going through. the deep ache. the awful sense of failure. being used as a football by all and sundry and thinking that men in gowns and wigs are deciding your fate. You have reason to be angry and you have reason to be cross with God and man. Believe me. I know what you are going through. You need love. You need a platform to express your anger. You need someone to listen to you. You need to be able to sit down and tell the world what the abuse was like.... I feel that you are a great person. I feel that what you have suffered has made you a great person. Give birth. Do not run away now (212).

The priest who appears to know little about the real facts of the case. is. nevertheless. close to articulating some of Mary's basic needs. What he has failed to mention. however. is who is going to provide that listening ear to the girl's true story. Who is going to provide her with that platform to express her anger? Who is going to believe her story about her father's abuse, even if she had the courage to shed her shame and reveal it? No offers have been forthcoming in this closed society.

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Mrs. Fitz. upon hearing this broadcast, smells a rat, and confides in her husband:

> "Something fishy," Mrs. Fitz says.
> "I'll say."
> "We better ring Cathal."
> "So that's why she won't talk... That's why. She's like a mute," Fitz says as he reaches for the telephone (213).

Cathal, a lawyer, takes Mary home to settle things with her father. He hopes to gain his permission to take her case to the Supreme Court. On the trip he asks her, "Do you sing, Mary?" "Not really.." she replies as he approaches her house. "I can't go in....He won't let me go ... If I go in there ... He won't let me go " (215). Cathal leaves Mary in the car while he faces James alone. As Mary stares at the chestnut and ash trees outside her home, childhood dreams flood her mind:

> When she was young one was her father and one was her mother and she used to have a little daydream that she would put her arms around each one and walk them together and loop a garland around them. Ten, twenty times a night she leapt out of bed to pray, in that long ago time, yet could not silence the sobbing, a sobbing within and without, human cries, animal cries, unearthly cries as if spirits clustered in every clod of the earth, feeling and needing those cries, that expiation, as though from it all would be resolved into a

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bright. afflictionless paradise. Except that it did not happen (216).

Even as a very young child Mary had intuited the friction between her parents, and had internalized her own helplessness to alleviate it. The sadness had penetrated the child's psyche.

James protests to Cathal that he loves Mary. "She means everything in the world to me... Or did" (218). He gives Cathal the wedding picture of James and Bridget to give to Mary, adding that. "After my wife died I asked them to send me somewhere... An infirmary...Anywhere... But they wouldn't (219). Cathal leaves James muttering in self pity. He does not go out to face Mary, nor does she venture in to see him. There is neither reproach, nor reconciliation.

However, James, aware of his own weakness, has also indicted society. He had asked for help, begged to be sent away but his pleas had been ignored. His neglect by society had contributed to Mary's plight.

Betty finds Mary's diary and contacts Cathal. As they read excerpts from it, the source of Mary's violations can no longer be denied. Cathal is livid:

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> "Jesus Christ...When did you find this?" Cathal is asking Betty.
> "After I came home...T'was in her schoolbag... I left a note for the priest... I left it in the sacristy... I more or less hinted... You see after everything that happened I was too afraid." Her voice apologetic at having to admit it.
> "This country...This fucking country is full of people who are too afraid--what are we afraid of...The truth... the stinking truth of ourselves...."
> "I prayed someone would come knock on my door."
> "You knew all along."
> "We all knew. all along...But we were too dumbfounded." she said (222).

Betty finally admits their complicity in maintaining the silence. Apparently. the priest who had written. the touching "Dear Magdalene" letter. also failed to mention what he knew.

Two Guards. Murph and Donal. try to wheedle a confession out of James. but he holds firm in his denial. They speculate on why Mary refused to accuse her father. and suffered so much because of the coverup:

> "But why wouldn't the girl talk...Why wouldn't she tell her solicitor?"
> "Shame. I've seen it before...Often... They feel dirtier if they tell it. They feel they're to blame in some way" (227).

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Mona comes to visit Mary. She had also been demonstrating. for a woman's right to choose. Still vulnerable from her own abortion. and the news that she has parted with her beloved Gabriel who had sulked so much about her pregnancy. she. nevertheless. urges Mary to stand up for herself and fight:

> "You have got to be a babe... You've got to fight...Fight for the freedom to say yes or no... Fight for others... That's what it's about...that's what life is about." Mona says and she seemed old then. old and dredged (232).

Mrs. Fitz who has been informed of more of the facts now. questions Mary about her father and the baby:

> "Do you hate him Mary?"
>
> "He was the wrong father...That's all..."
>
> "You should be over the moon... We've got what we prayed for." Mrs. Fitz said. and gave her a little pinch.
>
> "I don't want to have it and I don't want to kill it,' she said (235).

A group stand in vigil outside the house as Mary's nerves overwhelm her and she runs frantically out of control,"running from that room to the hallway, the stairs, the passages...a violence had been let loose, and in some ways they were afraid of her now (235).

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Mary is then placed in a convent where she continues to receive letters from well-wishers who advise her to have her child and make her country proud of her. Other letters are crude and vicious. Mary has aged from her experience:

> People were awful. people were dangerous. people would crucify one, the people one knew and the people one did not know. That last admission was the most terrible of all and the most frightful. Maybe that's what people meant by getting old. it wasn't the years. it was the knowledge. She had that now (237).

Deep in despondency she writes to her unborn child:

> *I don't hate you. you know I don't. If only you were my sister or my brother but not my child. If you could be spirited out of me that would be all right.. It is just that I cannot bear you. I am asking your soul to fly off now and wait for the right mother. But I know that cannot be* (237).

Mary tries to kill herself my cutting her wrists with a rusty nail. Another botched suicide attempt leaves her with infected wrists. and back with Mrs Fitz. They try to speculate what the decision of the five Supreme Court judges will be regarding Mary's right to leave the country.

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Molly, the schoolgirl daughter of Frank, one of the judges, warns her father:

> "Daddy," she says, her voice softer now. "You can't let this poor girl down, you cannot let her down, she's a scapegoat ...." Oh, I'm to go to school, am I... what do you think they're talking about...You and your four eminent colleagues can send this girl to the stake...It's a small country, Daddy...."
>
> "You would take me to England, wouldn't you?"
>
> "Why the hell did the girl come home."
>
> "Say that to the cameras," she said.
>
> "I'm not the only one who is thinking that, he says."
>
> "But no one says it, not you and the four Judases with you..."
>
> "Am I paying school fees for this impertinence....We don't talk this female ovulation bull."
>
> "Oh no, you don't because you're not fourteen years of age and sick and vomiting and a thing inside you put there against your will, God knows how brutally, no, you're men, you're dignitaries, you hold the reins. Good men... Wise men, pillars of society, and you go to mass and the sacraments every Sunday, Daddy, and you meet that actress in the lane at night."
>
> "What actress in the lane at night." His color changing...scalding.
>
> "I know for years, years.. I almost wrote a composition about it," she says blithely.
>
> "Thanks Christ you didn't..."

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> "If you vote no, if you refuse to let her out, I'll get the biggest boo in there in that school. I'll be boycotted."
>
> "I'll vote as my conscience tells me, not a bunch of hysterical girls" (241-243).

Molly in her plucky outburst has been able to penetrate her father's wall of hypocrisy. He ponders her attack and considers it later.

James is to be released if he agrees to plead insanity. Without remorse, and without a thought of his daughter's anguish he skulks off to the woods where he, Judas-like, eventually hangs himself. Judge Mahoney spends a sleepless night considering Mary's upcoming case, and mourning the loss of the old myths which are still so comforting:

> His choler from sleeplessness expressed in the rustle of the pages. Disquiet and bile until he suddenly espies something wholesome to read, a pleasant and heartening recollection of the old days and the old ways--Fairy women with long dark hair, Cu Nimbe, the poison hound, penances and miracles in lonely places (246).

The myths enable him to speak civilly again, solace from the past. Roisin reenters the scene. She, and several other women assemble in Madeline's house to await the verdict. Breed (one of

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the women) works on Mary's hair to make it presentable for the media coverage they expect. Mary wants her hair down, but is ignored:

> "We will make a true Irish girl out of you," Roisin says.
> "Do I put her hair up," Breed asks, lifting a long coil of it.
> "Yes better up... Tidier," Roisin says.
> "I don't want it up," Mary says. There's a moment's hesitation, a moment's bristle.
> "All right, don't put it up," and at that Roisin storms out.
> "You listen to me..." Breed says. "If Roisin says double that hair pin...Her word is law... Understand?"(251).

Roisin continues to give orders, and because of Mary's withdrawal, orders that she be locked up:

> "Put her in the dining room and lock that door... I don't want to hear that she has bolted."
> "She won't ... she's not well... She's sick."
> "Sick?"
> "I had to give her a hot water bottle for the pain"(255).

The women hear a rumor that Mary is to be freed. The "let her out" crowd were howling in the street. Roisin is livid, and refuses to accept this rumor:

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> "She can't go...She doesn't want to go...She'll regret it until her dying day if she does go... We have not lost...Whatever they say...Rubbish, we are not going to lose... the country is behind us... So never mind the legal scum...We'll overturn it ... We'll win" (255-256).

Roisin, a "Right to Life" fanatic, now on a power trip is out of control. Her brutality and insensitivity towards Mary are at odds with her espoused mission to save innocent lives. The quality of Mary's life seems to matter little to her. Mary's case is a means to focus the spotlight on Roisin's agenda. She fails to acknowledge the contradictions in her own behavior. As she and her followers consider new strategy, Mary is alone in the dining room writhing in pain. She grabs for a tablecloth to hold on to as she miscarries. They finally hear her screams and come into the room:

> "She's miscarried," a voice says in a whisper, and others stand in the doorway, staring as if at some tournament.
>
> "May you rot in hell...You have murdered it... You wanted that baby dead...You willed it... You'll pay for it every day of your life...Women crying out for babies...They'll curse you and God will curse you," Roisin says, standing over her, livid now, deprived of her victory, shrieking, nothing else mattering...(259).

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Still no one except Mrs B. moves a finger to help the stricken girl. A nun suggests they should all pray. Roisin commands Mary to kneel. Mary says she is unable to. Roisin insists. "Kneel down and confess before God that you did this" Finally, Mrs B. rushes forth to assist Mary. "In God's name will one of you call for the ambulance" (260).

Some time later, perhaps months or years, we find a changed Mary in a club with Mona. The location is deliberately vague. It might be England or Ireland. Mary has still not been able to tell anyone of her true experience. She still dreams that some day she will find someone who will prove a sympathetic listener and in whom she can trust the secrets within her soul. She is still in search of a soul mate, and has not yet found the courage to reveal her true self. However, hope still flickers in her spirit:

> Nowhere is the face she is searching for. The face she does not yet know. But would know the moment it materialised. And will know. She closes her eyes for an instant, thinking how it might be, how unimaginably beautiful it might be, that there would be a someone to whom she could tell it all, all of it, down to the last shred, but there would be no need to tell it because it would be already known and that would be love, that is what love is... (261)

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Mona is invited to sing. She strolls to the platform and sings a plaintive song, "She's every woman," and receives a cash prize. The disc jockey calls for more volunteers to "Strut your stuff like Mona Lisa did" (262). Scanning the tables he finally shouts "Mona's friend." "I can't sing" Mary protests...I've never sung before" (264). Mary rises from the table. "Walking towards the stage a hand and then another, reaches out to give her courage" (264). The disc jockey tweaks her red earlobe and introduces her to the audience:

> Her voice was low and tremulous at first, then it rose and caught, it soared and dipped and soared, a great crimson quiver of sound going up, up to the skies and they were silent then, plunged into a sudden and melting silence because what they were hearing was in answer to their own soul's innermost cries (265).

At last Mary had found the courage to sing. Whether she will ever find her own true voice and make it heard, remains to be seen.

Down By the River is definitely a breakthrough novel for O'Brien. She deals with topics long considered taboo in Ireland. More than anything she examines the damage done to sexually abused children in a society that dons blinders and remains silent,

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because the truth is too brutal to contemplate. Consequently, the victims are doubly victimized.

In renaming the "scandalous women" we find that they are really the shame-filled mothers, those who tolerate spousal abuse, because they are also victims. However, they perpetuate a passive acceptance of their predicaments, without ever demanding justice. Their inculcated squeamishness about sex, renders them incapable of instructing their children in the biological facts of life, fostering in them a shame for all natural body functions. Their refusal, or inability to communicate on a basic level with their children, stems from years of religious indoctrination, Victorian prudishness, and the remnants of Jansenism. There is no appropriate working vocabulary for discussing the body. Scientific names are unlearned, euphemisms are used by experienced adults, and the upper classes, and crude substitutes are accepted only within the confines of marginal society. Mary has to point to "down there" when she attempts to locate her pain. She does not know how to communicate her dilemma without acute embarrassment.

The few people who come forth to offer the protagonist any assistance, directly or indirectly, are generally the outcasts of

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society. With the exception of Molly, the schoolgirl, or Mrs B., who interrupts Roisin's tirade and demands an ambulance for the bleeding girl, almost everyone else is a persona non grata in respectable society.

Luke, the compassionate hippie musician, is castigated and humiliated by the guards, while his only crime was to offer Mary refuge. He is also referred to as "that tinker" by Mary's father, who had never even met him.

Olwyn, another tinker, had immediately guessed Mary's dilemma, respected the girl's privacy, but advised Mrs MacNamara to send the girl out of harm's way.

Mona, too had become an outcast, because of the abortion she had obtained in England. Yet she understood Mary's pain, and offered her support. It is no coincidence that the final chapter of the novel shows the two girls reunited as friends facing an uncertain future together.

Support was also provided indirectly by Molly, the spunky daughter of Frank, the judge. Representing, perhaps, some of the youth of Ireland, she bluntly penetrated her father's hypocrisy, and defended Mary's right to a voice in her own fate. Molly's support is

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undercut somewhat. when she confesses that she does not want to be booed by her classmates. if her father's decision is at odds with theirs. Nevertheless. it was a welcome intrusion in a sea of sharks.

The real scandalous women are: Bridget. Tara. Betty. Mrs Minogue. Nonie. Lizzie. Mary-Lou. Veronica, Mrs Fitz, and Breed. who all bailed out when the sea got rough. They failed Mary. None of them had the insight or courage to investigate her problem. carefully. or really to help her. No one really listened. or observed the girl closely. They too were the silent victims of society. unable to help themselves. Nonetheless. that failure to rally to one of their own sex is O'Brien's indictment of women too. Edmund Burke said. "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." That also holds true for women.

While all of the novels discussed in this chapter, examine the mother-child conflict, it is only in *Down By the River* that O'Brien extends this conflict to include other female characters, and consequently all women. In most of O'Brien's novels, the fact that men do not support women has come to be expected. However, the fact of women not supporting women negates the female experience, stifles woman's true voice, perpetuates the patriarchy,

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and. as O'Brien's protagonist-victims imply. becomes the ultimate betrayal.

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CHAPTER FOUR

"The basic discovery about any people is the discovery of the relationship between its men and women" (Pearl S. Buck, quoted in Leonard, 85).

RIGHTEOUS MEN

The delineation of male characters is not particularly Edna O'Brien's strong suit. Her male characterizations tend to fall into five basic categories or types:

1. Priests, who represent the patriarchal church and society which fail to adequately support females.
2. Fathers, who are frequently drunk, abusive, and crude, who instill fear into their wives and daughters.
3. Husbands, frequently older than their naive brides, who appear sensitive with Christ-like faces, and are often initially pursued by the protagonists, who embrace the idea of love and romance, but are terrified by sex and intimacy. The husbands soon transform into cold, devious, unforgiving, and emotionally cruel fiends.

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4. Lovers are similar. They are usually married men who promise the protagonists love and romance, but leave them high and dry, stranded in some foreign country in highly emotional states.
5. Sons are afforded idealized status. These female protagonist-mothers are devoted to their sons. They smother them with affection, and are emotionally devastated when these sons are wrenched away because of accidental death, or marriage.

True friendship with men is rare in O'Brien's novels. There are a few exceptions, with McGreevy of *House of Splendid Isolation*, who moves towards a semblance of true male-female communication with Josie, and Luke, the hippie musician of *Down By the River*, who tries to help young Mary MacNamara. At a recent reading of her work at New York University (February, 23,1998) O'Brien claimed that she considered Luke as representing what was best in men. Most of her characterizations reveal only the worst.

However, this is precisely what the female victims are reacting to, the negative forces in patriarchal society. To concentrate on the

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ideal would defeat O'Brien's mission which, as she declared at this same reading, was to speak for the women who have no voice in either literature, or in the society in which they live. She is recording the history of the losers, and exposing the forces in society which have denied them access to power or privilege, to respectability or support, and most of all, who have blocked the avenues to female fulfillment, autonomy and authenticity.

CHURCH FATHERS

The patriarchal systems are never directly attacked in the works of O'Brien. The female protagonists simply wilt with guilt and oppression under male-dominated laws or practices. Suicide, nervous breakdowns, institutionalization, senseless promiscuity, and shame-filled paralytic lives seem to be the common response of most of the female victims. The courage to examine the underlying causes of their half-lives is never pursued. Fear is their tragic flaw, and from a religious standpoint they become not lapsed Catholics, as society names them, but *collapsed* Catholics sinking under the burden of unrealistic expectations. The Church is never directly

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ridiculed. but when we examine how the representatives of the Church behave in several novels we can infer the negativity implied.

In *The Lonely Girl*. Kate Brady becomes involved with film-maker. Eugene Gaillard. Eugene is separated from his American wife. but is not yet divorced. When Kate's father receives an anonymous note about the relationship. he travels to Dublin in a half-drunken state to drag Kate back to her country village. He has already consulted the local priest. Father Hegarty. Kate. who is twenty-one. is desperate to be allowed to live her own life. mistakes and all. but she is surrounded by martinets who lay down the law on women's behavior. Several people shun her. Kate must agree to listen to Father Hegarty. When she does not actively seek his advice. he arrives at her home and is waiting for her at the kitchen table. He pressures her to give up her association with Eugene. who is thirty-five. The priest gives her a copy of *The Imitation of Christ* as a reference on which to model her behavior. He shames Kate so much that she is reduced to tears. Her father, "Dada". is overbearing with his daughter, but fawning with the priest:

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> Then he [the priest] came to the point that I dreaded. He asked me to promise never to see the divorced man again. never to write to him. never to let my thoughts dwell on the occasions I had been with him.
>
> "Promise me that?" he asked.
>
> "Do what you're told." Dada said. But I couldn't.
>
> The priest asked me again. and Dada shouted, and I just held my head down and kept silent. Dada shouted louder then. and the priest said. "Now. now Mr. Brady." and told Dada to take his cup of tea back to bed and not to get excited.
>
> "It's as big a sin for my father to be like that as for a man to have two wives." I said to the priest when we were alone.
>
> "I'm surprised at you." he said, "to speak of your good father like that. Every man takes a drink. It's the climate." His eyes were very bushy when he frowned.
>
> He asked again. "Will you promise not to see that man?"
>
> "I'll think about it." I said. It was the only way of getting rid of him.
>
> "We'll make an Act of Perfect Contrition, the two of us, together." And he began. "O my God." and waited while I repeated the three words. Then he said, "I am heartily sorry," and paused for me, and so on, until we had finished. I felt an awful hypocrite, saying words that I did not mean (*The Country Girls Trilogy*, 271).

Kate, a grown woman entitled to make her own emotional blunders, is no match for this type of coercion. She has no choice but to retreat to hypocrisy to save herself. Even when she notes the

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discrepancy between the treatment of men's shortcomings (her father's drinking), and those of women (as perceived by men), she is granted no satisfaction from the priest. He equates her father's flaws as manliness to be condoned, while her alleged indiscretion is considered scandalous, requiring immediate contrition and penance. The double standard operates blatantly.

Later, in the same novel when Kate has escaped and returned to Eugene, Dada turns to his barroom buddies and the priest again, who travel collectively to haul Kate back. They are adamant in their righteous cause. However, this time, although Eugene is beaten and bruised by this angry mob, he manages to drive them off his property with a shotgun.

The pressure continues as Kate continues to hear from her father and representatives of the church. "My father had written three times, the local priest wrote, the head nun from the convent sent me prayers and medals..." (338). Eugene, who is Irish but not Catholic, in his disgust calls them "Stone Age people" (339). In one last show of power, Dada shows up at Eugene's with the Archbishop, but Eugene refuses to open the door. Finally, the

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pressure abates. but not without placing tremendous strain on the Kate-Eugene relationship.

In *Girls in Their Married Bliss*. the last novel of the trilogy. the Church father is represented by a different kind of priest. This time we are presented with the sophisticated Monsignor, who frequents the house of Kate's best friend. Baba. He moves in the upper circles of society and is often present at social gatherings ready with polite party banter. Baba. discusses him with her sister-in-law:

> Frank [Baba's husband] won't tile a roof until he has discussed it with the Monsignor. She [her sister-in-law] hates that the Monsignor is more friendly with us than with them. I can just see him beside the fire, raving away about you can't beat an open fire, and full of well-being from the double cream sherry. Suffer the decanter to come unto me (433).

Baba. who is the opposite of passive Kate, is bawdy and audacious in her behavior, and is certainly much more critical of the church man's worldliness. She recognizes his penchant for creature comforts, and is forthright in her dealings with him. She does not dislike him but attempts to treat him as a familiar guest and family friend. However, when she boldly asks the Monsignor if priests

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wear trousers under their cassocks. a question which shocks the guests. he claims not to be shocked at all. Nevertheless. he is quick to put her in her place with his seemingly tolerant yet patronizing remark. "Baba has a good heart." I heard the Monsignor say. "Her only *failing* is that she inclines to be outspoken"(438).

Again it is a cardinal sin for a woman to raise her own voice in inappropriate utterance. It should be added on the Monsignor's behalf that he does come to visit Frank when he has a stroke. and his brother eases him out of their partnership leaving him in poor financial straits. Nevertheless. Baba is bitter when she interprets the Monsignor's attitude towards women coupled with the prevailing philosophy of the Catholic Church:

> Our other regular caller is the Monsignor, who has got very ecumenical with the times. which really adds up to the fact that he approves of Pope John Paul II traveling. Now when Pope John Paul II travels he says what Popes have been saying since *secula seculorum*-- "Thou shalt not sin." He's still for keeping women in bondage, sexual bondage above all, as if we weren't fucked up enough with our own organs, and whoever said that all women in the world enjoy all the fucking they have to do--no one, certainly not me. The Pope is all for bevies of children within wedlock, more children to fill the slums and the buses and smash telephone kiosks, because of course it's usually the ones in the slums that breed so

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> profusely, part of their routine, like a fry-up. The smarter ones know all the ropes, know how to keep in with the Pope and still swing from the old chandeliers. I don't discuss this with the Monsignor because it would be a beetroot face and a sermon, and to tell you the truth, I like him to come and sit with Durack [her husband] and reminisce. I'm as crooked as everyone else, except that I don't want to be (522).

Baba herself knows the score, and unlike Kate who tries to play by society's rules and loses, she bends the rules to suit her own purposes and therefore survives to beat the system. She is forced by circumstance to be "crooked" but acknowledges that she does not want to be; she would prefer to be her authentic self. However, after delineating her interpretations of the Church's expectations for women, what choice does she have? Of course, Baba's ability to manipulate and use convention by dint of her own cunning is unusual, and very rare in Irish society. O'Brien noted at a recent showing of the film version of *The Country Girls* (sponsored by Glucksman Irish House of New York University, February 10, 1998) that Baba is the character most women would all like to be, but are not. Even in fiction she is hard to recognize.

In *A Pagan Place* we find the handsome young Father Declan who seduces the young narrator and is quietly transferred, while the

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narrator is beaten brutally by her father for her part in the affair. After all, a thirteen-year-old sheltered girl should know more about morality and appropriate behavior than an adult man of God. The bitterness and veiled irony behind O'Brien's portrayal of Father Declan is salient. The young narrator withdraws to a convent to restore her good name in the village. Here again we see this Irish society's reluctance to hold the clergy accountable for its actions. Instead, society places the responsibility for the maintenance of morality on the shoulders of females, regardless of age. It appears that questioning the motives of their religious leaders might force them to deal with unsavory truths that are easier to avoid. This would not be quite so reprehensible if women and children were not left to bear the brunt of this denial.

In the same novel the narrator's mother attends a Protestant funeral service for the mother of an old friend. In her local church the following Sunday the narrator's mother is denounced from the pulpit. She is so angry and humiliated that she walks out of the church in a rare moment of protest.

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Later in this novel we find the narrator's mother seeking solace from Father Scanlon, a Dublin priest, as she searches for her pregnant daughter, Emma:

> After the third day when Emma had not appeared, she decided to go and see Father Scanlon anyhow. He received you in the hall of his house and didn't suggest a cup of tea or any eats. You had never seen a priest dressed so informally before. He was without a jacket and it seemed to you he was like many another man or woman pottering around the house. His voice was censuring.
>
> He said that Emma had gone the wrong way, was well on the path 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 her power over others. He looked at you.
>
> Your mother apologized for not being able to give him the offering for a Mass. He said that Emma might consider herself a winner but that it was a Pyrrhic victory. He said she used the red herring common to all heathens, the one about free will.... He would do all in his power to find Emma. He would be the hound of heaven (170-171).

Father Scanlon quickly locates Emma, and that is the full extent of his help. He offers neither tea nor sympathy to the frantic mother nor forgiveness to the daughter, but quickly washes his hands of them. Again the women find little compassion from the

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clergy. We hear of yet another local priest who keeps greyhounds. and who is quietly transferred for drinking. O'Brien does not paint a flattering picture of the clergy.

In *Night*, priests are given scant coverage. Patriarchy has somewhat faded in its influence on the irrepressible Mary Hooligan. One section in the novel where priests are mentioned is reminiscent of Joyce's short story "The Sisters" in *Dubliners*.

> There was altar wine on the windowsill and it bore a label from the land of Spain. She declined that. It was the priests' wine, the canons'. Poor canons, their old scrotums like dust, shedding maybe, shedding dust.... Poor canons, old gray, teetering lonely, and loony, with their frock coats and their faithful housekeepers, that breed of dark warted women that do wait upon them (16).

Mary for all her earthiness and promiscuity has a deep compassion for what she sees as the dried up lives of these men who have sacrificed all for a life of celibacy and suffering. Mary sympathizes; she does not condemn. Nevertheless, in reading her description of the loony old canons we are reminded of Joyce's Father Flynn and the sisters who tended him.

In *The High Road*, Catalina, because of her association with Anna, is beaten savagely by her father in front of the neighbors and

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might have been killed but for the intervention of her old grandmother. When Anna learns of this, she is guilt-ridden, and reverts back to her childlike way of dealing with her problems:

> "I'll go to the priest," I said, feeling myself hauled right back to that state of childhood trying to brazen out some terrible confrontation with adults, while quaking within.
> "You had better go..." she [Rosario, Catalina's sister] said. You had better..." (161).

However, Anna finds it impossible to confide in a priest, and turns ironically to D'Arcy, a slightly inebriated "spoilt priest" who does in fact come to her assistance. The traditional avenues of religious comfort are impractical when the character is confronted with an angry mob of venomous old crones, and righteous males, who are out for her blood. With D'Arcy's help, Anna escapes with her head, which is, if not exactly clear, at least still attached to her body.

In *House of Splendid Isolation*, Josie is befriended by Father John, who visits frequently. The crudeness and brutality of her husband's lovemaking has left Josie vulnerable to the kindness and attentions of the young priest, recently returned from the missions. As their relationship grows, Josie depends on his warmth and

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sympathy. She romanticizes the nature of the relationship, and when he fails to keep a rendezvous with her, she is devastated. To add to her misery, her corset has been found and returned to her husband, who suspecting the worst from her, beats her brutally. Not once does he blame the priest. "Nothing would make him understand that she had gone there to no avail and nothing would make her tell it" (147). Not only is Father John free of suspicion, but Josie the victim, protects him, and once again the female victim is punished for an uncommitted sin.

The most poignant part of Josie's experience with the priest comes later, after Josie has had a bout with madness, and is just returning to sanity. She is out walking in new shoes, which are hurting her feet. She sits in a ditch, and hopes to hitch a ride back to the house. Father John whom she has not seen since before the incident drives by:

> Hearing a car a little way off, she braced herself and got ready to stand up, but she was too late. It came at full speed around the corner and was his car and was him, looking exactly as he had looked months before, boyish and with that shadowy hesitancy to him, his eyes soft until he saw her, and then a stark look and the car gathering speed and his tearing off like a man who has seen a ghost. She did not move, not yet. She

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> sat there and thanked God that at least she had not been standing up, begging. She recalled his two expressions, the soft look and then the shock, or was it hatred, when he saw her.... There are moments in life when a great softness is coupled with a great hardness....
>
> "He had shown his true colours," she said, mashing her feet with her hands and glad of one thing, that she had not been standing with her hand up.
>
> "And the beautiful thing was that he never knew how much it meant to me," she said to the young girl who sat captive in the clothes basket, her legs swinging (158).

Josie has been betrayed by the priest, but never quite forgot the effect of his relationship. James, her husband, while refusing ever to cast doubt on Father John's integrity allows the hypocrisy of the situation to continue. Again, it is too difficult to confront the guilty party. He insists on accusing some "foreigner." Nevertheless, he betrays his unvoiced suspicions when he flings, into the fire the cloudberries, which had been a gift from Father John to Josie. She knows he knows, but it will never be discussed. There is a great deal of unuttered animosity between them. Neither their relationship, nor prevailing practices encourage open honest discussion. Real communication appears impossible. They are

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doomed to go on leading separate lives with all hope of real intimacy shattered.

In O'Brien's most recent novel, *Down By the River*, we are still given glimpses of members of the clergy who fail to fully support the causes of women. Sister Aquinas, who had endeavored to help Mary MacNamara, the young pregnant rape victim, while well-intentioned in her concern for the girl's welfare, is ill-equipped to deal with the girl's problem. The nun herself has led a sheltered life, and does not even have the language of true communication. Her vocabulary is limited to prayers and religious cliches, which prove inadequate. Mary needs a real flesh and blood maternal figure, who is ready and able to postpone sermonizing, and comfort the girl unconditionally. Unfortunately, compassion seems more a theory in this society than an applied principle. The good sister means well, but her dedication to the things of the next world, has left her unprepared to cope with the messy problems of this world, especially when they concern sexual activity, whether legitimate or furtive. Mary, although innocent, has been tainted by the sin of Eve. Unlike Maria Goretti, the popular child martyr, Mary has not forfeited her life to protect her virginity. The truth is,

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the ingenuous Mary probably did not even know what virginity meant.

When Mary's pregnancy is known, the local priest writes publicly to Mary in the "Dear little Magdalene" letter (quoted already in chapter three). He refers to her as Magdalene, an allusion to Mary Magdalene, the fallen woman who witnessed the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. The priest is also accusing Mary of some complicity in her own predicament. It appears that the priest might be reasonable in his assumption, until we find out much later in the novel that he knew more than he revealed. Another character, Betty, who had attempted to assist Mary in her pursuit of an abortion in England, which had failed at the eleventh hour, had subsequently written an anonymous letter to the priest explaining everything. Again, the truth was too terrible to grasp, and it became more politic to assign Mary the role of fallen woman, and offer her forgiveness if she returns to the fold, than to condemn James, her father, and her attacker. Silence, subterfuge, and the appearance of redemption and mercy are much more palatable than justice. O'Brien's message is clear here. Mary is allowed no voice

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in this society. Everyone speaks for her. If the truth does not fit into the various agendas, who needs it?

It becomes apparent from this brief look at the representative sampling of the fathers and daughters of the Church depicted in her novels, that O'Brien's characters are failed by members of the institution. Institutional religion never appears to meet the needs of the female victims, who turn to Nature, strangers, or any living thing that will lighten the spirit. Gladly, Mary goes to sing her sad song to anyone who will listen. Her own people have tuned her out.

FATHERS

The biological fathers of O'Brien's protagonist-victims are often the source of much of their angst. While they are never as fully realized in their portrayals as mothers are, they are, nevertheless, always lurking in the background, ready to pounce, or go on the batter or a drinking binge. They become so familiar that they are almost stereotypical. The protagonists' fears of the father

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are never mollified. Conversely, in *Down By the River* the fears mount to new and awful heights.

Edna O'Brien has talked little about her own father, but it seems safe to assume that her relationship with him was fraught with terror and heartache. She talks freely about her mother and sons, but her father and ex-husband are subjects which, even now, seem too painful to discuss. We will probably have to wait until she feels ready to write her memoirs, to learn the truth of these relationships. Nevertheless, the energy and passion she endows her portrayals of fictional fathers and husbands, seem to reek with the odor of authenticity.

In *The Country Girls* we are introduced to the first father. Dada, as he is called by the young protagonist Caitlin (Kate in the next two novels of the trilogy) is a brutal, uncouth, and drunken gambler, who takes off for days at a time, and frequently ends up in some monastery drying out. He makes what the girl sees as unreasonable sexual demands on her mother. Mother and daughter both fear his rage. Because of the father's abuse, the young girl lives in constant fear of her mother's death. "I was always afraid my mother would die while I was at school" (9). While she has

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problems with her bossy friend Baba, who sometimes takes advantage of Caitlin's shyness, she fears her father more. As she says, "Baba was a veterinary surgeon's daughter. Coy, pretty malicious Baba was my friend and the person whom I feared most after my father" (14). Right from her first novel, the pattern of the overpowering and dominating father is established.

When Caitlin's mother is drowned, the girl's primary fear is being left alone with her father. Her first romantic relationship is with an older married man, whom she refers to as Mr. Gentleman. He is "old, old" but treats her kindly, thus becoming part of the search for a true father figure, when the biological father proves unworthy. However, even Mr. Gentleman leaves Caitlin waiting at the dock at the end of the novel. In *The Lonely Girl,* Kate's father, as I have said, righteously arrives to separate his daughter from her unsuitable lover, Eugene. At this point, the lovers are living together, but the relationship has never been consummated because of Kate's terror of sex. Nevertheless, Dada feels within his rights to exercise his control over his daughter, whom he still sees as his property, and demands her return. Eugene, another older man, and a substitute father figure, tolerates Kate's fears and phobias

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temporarily, but eventually finds her too needy, and severs the relationship. A tearful and abandoned Kate leaves alone for England at the end of this novel.

The older Kate of *Girls in Their Married Bliss* has reunited with Eugene and eventually married him. Ironically, he becomes as controlling as her own father, and we find her still yearning for that supportive male presence. When the marriage founders, and Kate finds herself separated from Eugene and their son, Cash, she panics and admits the need for a father:

> She knew danger as she had never known it: the danger of being out in the world alone, having lost the girlish appeal that might entice some other man to father her. It wasn't just age; she was branded in a way that other men would spot a mile away, and though still young, she had not the energy to coax, and woo, and feed and love and stroke and cosset another man, beginning from the very beginning again (455).

Shortly after this admission of fatigue with the role she is forced to play in society, we find Kate, on the brink of a nervous breakdown, admitting:

> She thought of her father, and wondered why he meant nothing at all to her now. It seemed barbarously unfair that someone could have such a calamitous effect on her and still not pop into her mind more than twice a day (457).

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As a psychologist. Linda Leonard defines this classic female behavior and ambivalence towards the father as part of the "puella complex." which afflicts females who have had damaged father-daughter relationships. The puella or "eternal girl" is the passive child-like woman who never really grows up or becomes authentic. but sees herself as a mere reflection of the male and is totally emotionally dependent on his approval. Independence terrifies her. The condition has resulted from faulty messages the child has received from the dominant males in her life. especially the father. Leonard insists on the wounded female's need to transform herself and become whole. If this effort is not made, the female remains psychologically crippled and forever dependent. Autonomy is impossible until the father-daughter wound is healed:

> The father-daughter wound is not only an event happening in the lives of individual women. It is a condition of our culture as well. Whenever there is a patriarchal authoritarian attitude which devalues the feminine by reducing it to a number of roles or qualities which come, not from woman's experience but from an abstract view of her--there one finds the collective father overpowering the daughter, not allowing her to grow creatively in her own essence.

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> Whether the father-daughter wound occurs on the personal level or the cultural level, or both, it is a major issue for most women today. Some women try to avoid dealing with it by blaming their fathers and/or men in general. Others may try to avoid it by denying there is a problem and living out the traditionally accepted feminine roles. But both these routes result in giving up responsibility for their own transformation, the one via blame, the other via adaptation. I believe the real task for women's transformation these days is to discover for themselves who they are. But part of this discovery entails a dialogue with their history, and with the developmental influences that have affected them personally, culturally, and spiritually.
>
> As a daughter grows up, her emotional and spiritual growth is deeply affected by her relationship to her father. He is the first masculine figure in her life and a prime shaper of the way she relates to the masculine side of herself and ultimately to men. Since he is "other", i.e., different from herself and her mother, he also shapes her differentness, her uniqueness and individuality. The way he relates to her femininity will affect the way she grows into womanhood (10-11).

Kate fits the "eternal girl" profile perfectly, as do several other protagonist-victims in O'Briens's novels. Kate is terrified to be on her own, and it is only after her breakdown that she picks up the pieces of her life. Even then, she is always searching for the man who will save her. When he fails to materialize, she commits

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suicide. Even in this act. Kate cannot be truthful. She leaves a particularly cheery letter for Baba. who immediately sees through the subterfuge:

> Her letter to me says nothing. inanities about fasting and jogging and being on the mend. A blind really, so that no one would know. so that her son wouldn't know. self-emulation to the fucking end (*The Country Girl's Trilogy*. 524).

It is Baba also who finally articulates the heart of Kate's problem. "Father--the crux of her dilemma.... I suppose it was the future she couldn't face, the thought that it would be the same forever. eons of fucking emptiness" (531). For the unrealized Kate. no doubt. Baba is correct. While Kate stayed burdened with patriarchal pressures from her father. husband and society, her future was indeed bleak and empty.

In *Casualties of Peace* little time is devoted to the father influence in this novel. That role has been appropriated by Willa's husband, Herod. Nevertheless, during one of their countless arguments Herod counters her questions about his behavior with his own observations. This Willa reveals in an unmailed letter to her lover Auro, which is found after her accidental death:

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> He said. "Many women project their family into their later life and for some it is the only involvement they can have." He said possibly I was repeating the ties with my father. I said I never knew my father which is the truth (136).

In this novel the protagonist transfers her fears of her father to her husband. Herod. however. thinks that Willa's father in not entirely blameless in his daughter's inability to cope with life. but this is never fully examined.

In *A Pagan Place* the protagonist's father is more nostalgic and romantic than her mother. He had burned his family's big house down to the ground rather than let the Black and Tans occupy it. Nevertheless. he is also violent and takes a pitchfork to the young girl's mother. who repeatedly tries to prevent her husband from going out to get drunk. At one point he locks himself in a room with a loaded revolver (34). When he wants his sexual needs served. he issues "edicts" to the mother, who has to "go across the landing to his room" (27).

When the father drinks excessively, and is too abusive, he is sent to a monastery for the "cure". When he returns, and is more concerned with his horse than his family, her mother leaves to "teach your father a lesson" (76).

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One of the few positive comments regarding the father in the novel is made ironically by the mother and related to the major:

> You did the daftest thing, you handed your father a sixpence. He said what was that for. You said for overheads. He laughed. The major laughed. He pretended to keep it. He called your mother in to tell her what a generous girl you were and she too was touched and half in sadness and half in happiness she said to the major that between you and your father there was a real bond but that neither of you would ever admit it (96).

The bond between father and daughter is never acknowledged, and the father remains a shadowy figure who screams, issues commands, threatens to poison his pregnant daughter, Emma, but is ineffectual as both husband and father. He is as much a victim of the patriarchal system as everyone else. Roles are demanded of him which he is unable to fulfill, and he remains a brutal yet pathetic figure.

In *Night*, Mary Hooligan refers to her parents as Boss and Lil. While she has conflicts with both, it to her father she assigns her initial fear of sex, because of what she considered his brutal treatment of her mother. He seemed to be a man who was

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constantly angry. When he learns that a new tennis court is about to be erected, from which the farmers are to be excluded, Mary recalls one of his many outbursts:

> Farmers were to be prohibited. When Boss heard that, he harangued. He hated to be slighted. His temper rose, causing him to down three indigestion tablets, which he cracked vehemently with his molars. The precincts smelled of magnesium. Oh, Boss, were you ever not on the edge of a cataclysmic ire, with your two brown suits and your white shins that were revealed to all at the plowing match of Glenstall, the day you got a kick.... "Buggerotum to tennis," Boss said, " a fop's game, stirabout." To have known and not known, now that is a glim thing. Glim. Glaucous (10).

In chapter three I have already referred to the pressure of guilt that Mary's father dumps on her shoulders after her mother's death. She is coerced into staying home with him temporarily, but it soon becomes impossible. There is no way he will allow her to live her own life without his interference. He wants a surrogate wife, housekeeper and servant. Mary knows she is not up to these multiple tasks and returns to England. Near the end of the novel, she recalls her final parting. It is a truce, rather than a reconciliation:

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> He threw water on the fire to dampen it down and said. "I knew you wouldn't renege me." giving me a little biff. In him resided the stance. the wild umbrage prevalent in all the men that I had loved. unloved. fled from (112).

Mary is acknowledging the similarity in the men in her life. They are all touched by the same taint of seething anger at life. Moreover. Mary seemed to have sought this underlying "umbrage" in them. She. like several other protagonists. seems bent on destructive relationships. which invariably end in disaster. The basic father-daughter antagonism implied. never ends.

In the short story "What a Sky" (*Lantern Slides*). we discover another father-daughter conflict. The female narrator visits her aging father in a nursing home. The narrator dreads the visit. "This makes her quake. and she digs her fingers into her palms for fortitude" (76). The father is demanding. "I was expecting you two hours ago. His mood is foul and his hair is standing on end, tufts of grey hair sprouting like Lucifer's" (76). She acknowledges his wretched past life, but like Mary in *Night,* refuses to sacrifice her life for him. He in turn, tries to lay some guilt on her. "It's no life for a father," he says, and she realizes that he is about to ask for a guarantee that she cannot give" (82). But the paralysis she feels

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when she endeavors to take him out even for a brief trip. is so overwhelming that she fears any confrontation with the fact that she is unable to really tolerate the closeness with him. The idea of any intimacy with him. however slight. repulses her. The origin of this conflict can only be inferred:

> It [the trip] will be a talking point with him for weeks to come. instead of eczema or the broken arm. Something is impeding her. She wants to do it. indeed she will do it. but she keeps delaying. She tries to examine what is making her stall.... What she dreads is the intimacy. being with him at all. She foresees that something awful will occur. He will break down and beg her to show him the love that he knows she is withholding; then. seeing that she cannot. will not. yield, he will grow furious. they will both grow furious. there will be a terrible showdown. a slanging match of words. curses, buried grievances. maybe even blows....
>
> Each time she moves in her chair to do it, something awful gets between her and the nice gesture. It is like a phobia, like someone too terrified to enter the water but standing at its edge. Yet she knows that, if she were to succumb, it would not only be an afternoon's respite for him. it would be for her some enormous leap. Her heart has been hardening now for some time, and when moved to pity by something she can no longer show her feelings--all her feelings are for the privacy of her bedroom. Her heart is becoming a stone (84-85).

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However, the daughter remains unmoved. She knows she too has been wounded, and while she wants to love and forgive him, at the same time, she has not yet healed old hurts. She only recites verses in place of singing songs. "He had repeatedly told her that she could not sing, that she was tone-deaf" (85). Both parties are so trapped in their own emotional prisons that they are unable to communicate. He stares at her knowing that she is defecting on a generous impulse, but she turns from him unable to help herself and moves to leave the room. "As she rises to leave, she feels that her heart is in shreds, all over the room. She has left it in his keeping, but he is wildly, helplessly looking for his own" (87). There is no possibility of real communication here. There is too much painful history between father and daughter, and neither will give an inch. Sadly, there is love there too, buried under the mire of mutual disappointment.

In *I Hardly Knew You*, the protagonist, Nora, is on trial for the murder of Hart, her young lover. She killed him in terror while he was having an epileptic fit. She gradually reveals the circumstances which led to the murder act, and slowly it becomes evident that memories of her father have contributed to her agitated

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condition. Again, the protagonist is overwhelmed by fear. References to her father are slight at first, but soon become increasingly significant. The pattern of the "eternal girl" is also repeated here as Nora reveals what she considers the importance of beauty to a woman, advice which she internalized from Dame Dora, a female acquaintance, who "mowed men down with her glacial beauty" (3):

> Nevertheless tomorrow I will pay particular attention to how I look.
>
> Before the night is through I will put curlers in to make quiffs, and do As and Es to make the face muscles taut. In the end good looks are the chief weapon of a woman although they may lead her into desperate straits, into the gutter. Yet if she keeps those looks through thick and thin she is the winner, she is above them all, at least to outside appearances, and believe me most people go by appearances (2).

However, while Nora reveals this shallow philosophy, she admits that Dame Dora was too cunning and hard for her to ever be really close to. "I never really gave her a place in my heart, never ever" (3). It as though Nora knows on some level that the philosophy is flawed, that she is aware of the dangers for women of buying into this beauty myth. She has made the mistake of

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accepting "beauty over knowledge" (Leonard, 138). Beauty is never the road to selfhood. Somewhere, some time Nora, the "eternal girl" must confront the rage that is masked by her "puella" performance. It filters out sporadically:

> We will come to my crime and the madness of it, but what preceded it was much madder. 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 (*I Hardly Knew You*, 10).

The seeds of murder have been in her subconscious for some time, and were slowly germinating. Later she claims she has been paying for crimes all her life, ones that she did not commit, the "sins of my fathers" (37). Here she includes the entire patriarchy in her indictment:

> I acknowledged having been a monster at times, the way I wanted to kill my own father, the way I gloated over it. I hacksawed him bit by bit then decided on a bit of incineration and having tucked him into the big grey boiler I let him burn slowly, then opened a little slide door when the pieces were well charred picked them out with brass tongs, for display. Then I consigned him to the most forgotten, most secluded , most scalding and most ignominious corner of hell. They will say Oedipus. Oedipus my arse. God is the culprit (38).

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The extent of Nora's resentment towards her father, is in direct relation to the energy she displays in the vehemence of her imaginative punishment of him. Even then, she is unwilling to blame him directly, but rather makes God, the heavenly Father, the real culprit. We can infer from the violence within Nora, that it is just a matter of time before it bursts out in some physical form. She is on the brink of madness. She recalls the days when her drunken father had to be sent to the monastery, (a familiar pattern) and his constant brutality towards her mother. "Have I not lived day and night wanting to kill the father that sired me the father scion of all fathers, who soiled my mother's bed" (78). Her thoughts drift again to her early expectations of men when she and her friends believed "that there was a species of gent quite different from the ones we knew who would charge into town and carry us off" (126).

Again, we have glimpses of women who have internalized the fiction of the fairytale romance and are predisposed to meet with disappointment. Even in this small excerpt, a dissatisfaction with local lads is evident. In this society many young girls note the discrepancy between fictionalized romance, and the reality of experience.

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Nora is moving towards the climax of her anger. The venom accumulates as she claims:

> I even think I should turn the tables. I should perhaps say that I am proud and jubilant to have killed one of the opposite sex, one of that breed to whom I owe nothing but cruelty deceit and the asp's emission (129).

Finally, as Nora moves closer to action, the bile pours forth like some putrid stream as she reacts to Hart:

> He had gone into a fit.
>
> "Jesus, he has gone mad," I thought. The thing I dread most, in bed with a madman. Did I not see instantly my mad father with his long gaitered shins and his cuttlebone tongue standing over me frothing.... Gone the St. John of the Cross and instead the very features of Lucifer (197).

The father has been demonized and successfully exorcized. As Nora drifts in and out of madness, it is clear that Hart was not the target of her scorn, just the innocent instrument of some deep-rooted psychic revenge. The fit had transformed him into Nora's biggest nightmare--sleeping with her mad father, a thought that drove her to defend what she believed were the last remnants of her self. It is significant to note that after this emotionally wrenching performance, O'Brien writes no novels for eleven years.

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In *The High Road*, the father-daughter conflict has petered out for Anna, the protagonist of the novel. Her father had died in a nursing home, and she assigned him a peaceful death unlike that of her mother:

> My dead father by comparison was serene, with a rose that a nun had put in the crook between thumb and forefinger, a red rose, his waxen skin like singed rice paper, but unangry, all anger gone. Last time I saw him alive I had brought a friend, another woman. "Don't leave me alone with him," I begged of her, because that was what he most wanted, to be alone with me, to say something, anything--a curse, a harangue, a plea (44).

The anger between father and daughter may have dissipated, but the fear remains with the daughter. Anna is mortally afraid that he will exact some deathbed promise from her--a promise she will be unable to keep. Nevertheless the guilt of it will plague her, and in this instance, avoidance seems her best weapon. She is never quite ready for the truth of confrontation. Even the ailing father endeavors to wield his patriarchal power over his daughter from his deathbed.

While Anna has put to rest her patriarchal demons, in this novel, the father-daughter conflict is taken up by Catalina and her

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father. This Spanish father is every bit as domineering and unreasonable with his daughter as any Irish father. He treats Catalina as a servant, and expresses little concern when he learns that she might have been raped. He goads her, and bullies her, always trying to break her spirit:

> She talks of her father, how he tests her, how he bullies her, how he watches to see her strength ebb. How he cheers when she falters. That very morning when it was still dark and they had hefted the bags of lemons on to the barrow and were bringing them down the path, he let go of his end, hoping the barrow would run away with her, hoping she would stumble and fall, except that she didn't, she clung on.
>
> "Yesterday, when I was ploughing... he did the same thing... he ran in front of the plough... and for what... to remove a little white pebble from the ground... no bigger than a bead... it wouldn't have broken the plough... he just wanted to break me... he always wants to break me," she said, and called him monster, actor, emperor, and clown (82).

Catalina's father, who had wanted a son, is intensely jealous of the energy, resilience and strong streak of independence in his daughter. She does not fit neatly into his preconceived notions of what a dutiful daughter should be. Her wild streak confounds him. She refuses to behave as her dependent sister, Rosario does--always complaining, and whining, but accepting the life of a drudge. It is

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no wonder Anna finds Catalina's free sprit so appealing. However, her betrayal of the prevailing model of womanhood is soon punished, and she is eventually slaughtered by an angry estranged husband. Her father is noticeably absent from the mourners.

In *Time and Tide*, that familiar drunken angry father reappears. When Nell, the protagonist, is having trouble with her husband and they plan to cut their trip to Ireland short, because of religious conflicts with her parents, Nell is still in terror of her father's reactions:

> She saw her father approach, his tweed cap far back on his head and his eyes crazed with fury. She thought for an instant that he was going to open the car door, haul her out, and kick her, as he so easily might.... "Little shite... and you always were... always... from the minute you were born." A death blow there and then (14-15).

Nell feels the full force of her father's resentment. She is only now realizing that it goes back to her very birth. Several years later, when her mother dies, and her father pleads with her to either stay or take him with her, she is unable to forget the damage she believes has been done to her by both parents, and hardens her heart in refusal. However, the refusal is not without anguish. She examines

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the complexity of their relationship, her need to confide, juxtaposed with her dread of intimacy and connection:

> She would have liked then to have poured her heart out, to tell him how afraid of him she had been, his shouting, his boots, the very click of the latch as he opened the door, and to tell him her abiding fear, which was that all other men, no matter what their character or their voices, were shadows of him, whom she was afraid of, and because she was afraid of them, she was unnatural and beholden, an outcast from the very intimacy she craved.... Near as they had been in their bristle and their enmity, they knew nothing at all about each other's deepest, most wretched feelings, and shrunk from the contemplation of them. Only by living inside these cages and growling at each other as animals might could they manage at all (176).

Nell knows that at this point in their relationship, it is useless to try to communicate. There is no hope for either forgiveness or understanding within the confines of their respective cages. They are both trapped in individual prisons of their own making. Neither is able to make the emotional leap necessary for healing. Reconciliation is not yet possible.

In *House of Splendid Isolation*, the father-daughter conflict is replaced with the wife-husband antagonism between James and Josie. However, in *Down By the River*, O'Brien's most recent

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novel to date. the old battle rages stronger than ever. In chapter three. I have already mentioned several of Mary MacNamara's harrowing experiences at the hands of her father. who rapes and impregnates the thirteen-year-old girl. The extent of the father's callousness is sometimes difficult to accept. until we recognize the fact that the true atrocity of his crime never really enters his mind. Because of his patriarchal outlook, he sees Mary as an object. a mere piece of his property which he is justified in using any time he likes. Never at any point in the novel does he express either any regret for his crime. nor any genuine concern for his daughter. It is only when the law is at the door. and is virtually closing in on him. that James panics and heads for the hills. to hang himself like Judas. Never once. even before the suicide, does he ask forgiveness, or feel remorse for the trauma he has inflicted on Mary.

James' failure to seek redemption through confession. is in total contrast to Mary's attitude towards him. She is able to purge her heart of hate, and defend him by simply claiming that he did his best. "He was the wrong father... That's all" (235), is as critical as she gets.

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Ironically, it her very unwillingness to change her memory of him, and her valiant effort to pick up the pieces and resume living, that frees her soul and makes it possible to sing her song in the last chapter. Mary has begun to heal the father-daughter wound at last. This is a considerable advance over previous protagonist-victims, and one of the reasons I see this novel as a breakthrough. Mary is still hoping some day to meet a gentle man, with a heart, with whom she can confide the real truth of her experiences. Meanwhile, she is taking a part in the authentic music of life.

HUSBANDS

Husbands in the works of O'Brien are remarkably similar. They have sensitive Christ-like faces, appear sensitive and caring, until later in the marriage, when they transform into psychological monsters. Most of them are several years older than their wives, and to some degree serve as father figures. The patriarchal stance continues, and while it does, there is little hope available to the females under their emotional thumbs. It is as though these women are playing out the same roles repeatedly--all courting their own

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destruction. These passive women allow the men in their lives to gain complete control over them, and then wonder why they are so miserable. Eugene Gaillard, of both *The Lonely Girl*, and *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, becomes the prototype for the husbands in many subsequent novels. The names change; the character is similar. He is priest-like, intense, authoritarian, and invariably views himself as superior to his wife both emotionally and intellectually. In *The Lonely Girl*, as Eugene and Kate pursue their relationship, we are given clues to his controlling nature. Kate has just escaped from the tyranny of her father, when she moves in with Eugene. They are visited by some of his literary friends. As some of them are from America, Kate reveals that she would like to visit that country some day. Eugene's response is quick and unexpected. "Over my dead body," Eugene said. "I like that old song about stay as sweet as you are" (355). Eventually, finding Kate too needy he breaks up with her, and she goes to England alone.

In *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, we find Kate and Eugene not only reconciled, but married. Already, the relationship is deteriorating. Eugene, in his coldness, begins to freeze Kate out, so much so that she seeks solace with another man. All they ever do is

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talk and compare miseries. Nevertheless, when Eugene follows her, and discovers her tryst, he then punishes her with more silence. Just as we witnessed in the father-daughter relationships, there is never any real communication. Baba, who narrates several parts of this novel, declares that Eugene should have been a monk; he has become such a recluse:

> Silence in the evening didn't work out after all. Her [Kate's] life was like a chapter of the inquisition. He [Eugene] wanted her to stay indoors all the time and nurse his hemorrhoids (387).

The rest of the novel charts the slow deterioration of the marriage. It is filled with Kate's pathetic reactions to Eugene's numerous petty cruelties. He tortures her by degrees. She wants to leave, but is in constant fear that he will take their son Cash. He constantly uses emotional blackmail to get what he wants:

> At Christmas, a few weeks before she gave him a calendar on a marble stand and he said, "You're sure this is for me?" He produced two packages, one for Cash and one for Maura [the maid].
>
> "You forgot me," she said to him sullenly.
>
> "I give presents when I want to," he said, "not out of duty."
>
> "You're quite right," she said, but in the wrong tone.

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> "I see you're getting your persecution complex back. put a sign out" (392).

Kate. stung by Eugene's humiliation of her in front of Maura. musters her courage and prepares to leave to meet her male friend. Eugene insists on accompanying her despite her explanation that she wants to talk privately with Baba. When he sits beside her on the bus. she feels both angry and stifled:

> It was useless. He occupied most of the seat. too. and was crushing her new skirt.
>
> "If you sat on the other seat I'd have more room." she said to Eugene. The words cut like a lancet through the fog-filled chatter. She stopped short. They looked at each other for some time. It was the last look of pity that passed between them. Each turning to the other had felt the ghost go out. A little phrase had severed them. He moved to the seat behind (394).

Kate is still vulnerable, and does not have Eugene's instinct to preserve. He witnesses her meeting with her friend, but again there is no confrontation. However. he silently freezes her out of his life. She finds little cryptic notes left where she is likely to read them. One of them reveals his misogyny. "Now and then he thought all women could not possibly be bitches, but not for long, reality was

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always at hand" (401). This silent hostility is later followed by cold indifference, and when Kate and Eugene finally separate, Kate's self-esteem is in shambles. It takes a lot of time and therapy before she is able to fight for custody of Cash, which a judge eventually grants to her after listening to one of Eugene's callous letters read out in court. Of Eugene she claims, "His little dictatorship demanded a woman like her--weak, apologetic, agreeable" (455). Kate limps emotionally through the rest of her life scarred from her experiences with men, until her eventual suicide. Her relationship with her husband had been as emotionally devastating as the one with her father. She saw death as the only exit from the pain of living.

The relationship between Willa and Herod of *Casualties of Peace* resembles that of Kate and Eugene in many respects. She had assigned him "Christ-like standards for which she could upbraid him when he failed" (122). The relationship is over when the novel begins, but Willa is still haunted by the pain of it. However, she accepts some of the blame now for the breakup. She tries to resurrect her feelings with Auro, her new lover, who is growing restless with her squeamishness and reluctance to become

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sexually involved with him. The familiar fear of intimacy pattern emerges again. This time, she has less fear, but she is still tormented by a past that clings. Willa knows this attitude will sabotage her chances of happiness with Auro, but she feels powerless to do very much to change things. "What man loves a tormented woman for long, what man is fool enough" (123). Immediately after this flash of insight, Willa is shot accidentally by her friend Patsy's husband. The Willa-Herod relationship is then revealed through a series of unmailed letters written to Auro. She describes how they had lived in an abandoned sanatorium in Switzerland, where, "He said many plants need a period of severe cold in order to encourage germination.... I asked to be brought out to rejoin the world" (126). In a later letter she reveals still more about her servile role in their relationship. "I always walked a little behind--like a dog--following the meander of his thoughts" (128). The marriage ceremony between Willa and Herod parallels that of Kate and Eugene:

> The marriage ceremony was grim. It was held in a Roman Catholic church, because he said the old mythology dies hard in all of us. It was in the sacristy, and the witnesses were all strangers. There was a dispute afterwards about

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> money. and I smelt something rancid. which must have been the wax of the altar candles (130).

Herod continues to chip away at Willa's confidence. reminding her. "You wouldn't survive a day in the world. You live in confusion and shame". "He said I ought to be thankful that he had volunteered to be my keeper" (131). Brutal as Herod is. some of the comments he makes about Willa are true. She does live a shame-based life. However. what can we expect from a girl brought up in a repressive society. with a drunken and insensitive father. and a cold and cruel husband? These are all sick characters--a case of the blind leading the blind. The need for apology, expiation, and punishment continue to dog Willa as she tries to extricate herself from the clutches of Herod. Paradoxically, she needs him, and needs to be free from him at the same time. She is unable to leave. He reminds her, "You do not go because you would rather have a man that punished you that one who did not, because you are a woman" (132). Eventually, in a minor act of rebellion she lets the cow, who symbolizes Willa's own passivity, out of the barn:

> The cow tossed her head, let out one of her dreary moans, and shat contentedly over the new snow. On its whiteness a treacle-colored pat spread scutterishly over a big area. It made

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> a crazy shape and the liquid trickling out defiled still more snow. And how I welcomed it: slime on the unlimited whiteness. A song. My first little rebellion. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" He was standing in the kitchen doorway studying me, with his pre-war binoculars. I smiled to myself and turned my back so that he could not see my face. I led the cow back. I thought since I had come here a lot of things have broken out inside me: dissonance, cunning, madness and hate. The niceness can never be assembled again (134).

The change Willa notes in herself is not yet enough to give her the strength to leave Herod. Even when he puts an eyeshade on her, points to a field and tells her to leave, she is paralyzed. When she hits her emotional rock bottom, she finally surfaces with some pluck. She thinks, "Do you know something Herod? You do not rule me any longer. If you want your power back, you will have to kill me" (140). Willa walks out when he least expects it, and leaves him "high and dry."

When Auro reads all of this, his comment about Herod is simply, "poor mad bastard, impotent too" (141). Auro, who might have proved a sensitive lover, is never given the chance. O'Brien seems only interested in documenting failed relationships.

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In *Night*. Mary Hooligan, who is far more resilient that Kate or Willa, was nevertheless at one point unhappily married to "Dr. Flaggler, one of the original princes of darkness" (75), who was a curator by profession. He strongly resembles Eugene and Herod of the previous novels. The marriage is cold, the husband controlling. "Ours was not a blessed union." Mary confides, "Full of foreboding even at its best" (76). As their union disintegrates, the effects of the frigid life begin to tell on Mary, who admits:

> I would have embraced anything at the time, a sheaf or a pillar, and my hunger was such that my arms used to lollop out of their own accord, reach blindly for some unfortunate person to hold on to (79).

Eventually, in desperation Mary looks elsewhere for comfort, and finds it temporarily with the courier. When Flaggler became aware of it, instead of confronting her, he imprisons her. Again, we see the patriarchal pattern of ownership in force:

> He locked us in the small wooden bedroom. It was so hot that the gum from the wood had blistered into hard notches of dark amber. Nothing flowed except our hatreds. He said, "You are not going to escape me, it is beyond you, it is unattainable." I sat there in a taffeta dress, meek and couchant, and I thought there was nothing for it but to remain thus, silent, slavish,

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> paralyzed. Why such enmity and when did it begin to fester? (80).

There is no saving this relationship. Its final annihilation is remarkably similar to that of Kate and Eugene on the bus. Flaggler tells Mary, "You never thought it would end on a public conveyance," he said. "I never thought..." I said flatly" (82). Though there are many blighted days and nights to follow, the marriage is over.

The difference in this novel is that Mary, though scarred, and battered in relationships, remains unsinkable. In the last pages we still find her searching for the unattainable. However, she compromises, and consoles herself with substitutes. "Oh, shadows of love, inebriations of love, foretastes of love, but never yet the one true love" (116). She intends to " live a little before the awful all-embracing dark enfolds..." (117). Despite the disappointments of her relationships with men, Mary has declared herself a survivor.

In *I Hardly Knew You,* Eugene, Herod, and Flaggler are replaced with Jude, Nora's husband. He resembles them in age, appearance and sensibility. Like Eugene, he threatens her father and his friends with a rifle when they drag Nora back. There are

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several similar situations all of which reveal him as another authoritarian and controlling father figure:

> My husband waited in the big dark gaunt sitting room, doing something exacting, such as his accounts or taking one of the clocks to pieces. At times he would talk, at times he would glare, at times he would say " Come here," and I was the happy receiver of a paternal kiss or a paternal pat (42).

The paternal nature of their relationship established, Nora can hardly think of the marriage bed without shuddering. Instead of conversing with her as a husband, Jude summons her like an angry ruler:

> "Would you come upstairs please." I went up to the bedroom. He turned the key in the door.
>
> "Any more monkey business out of you and I will have you committed." I had heard those words before, in fact heard them when I was poised to elope with him. Too ridiculous.
>
> "There is no monkey business," I said, as brazenly as I could.
>
> "You will do as you are told," he said. "From now on I am master" (46).

Nora has exchanged the emotional prison of her father's house, for another with her husband. The patriarchal dominance is

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perpetuated. Again the familiar fight for custody of their son ensues:

> "I will take him to New Zealand where you will not see him," he said. A desert sprang up before my eyes, more loss.
> "You will never," I said and ground my teeth and he struck me a few times and that's nothing spectacular except that I lose my senses at the slightest whiff of violence (46).

As this marriage also founders on the rocks for precisely the same reasons as all the others, the manipulating and controlling Jude locks Nora out of the house and threatens her with a shotgun. When she reports the domestic violence to the police, she is offered little assistance. "The only thing they could ask me was did he molest me. I found it fairly funny. I spent the night on some bench, a bit numb and unafraid" (48). She tries to return home but is again locked out. There is nowhere is this community for a battered wife to go for refuge. She finally leaves, but Jude has taken her son. Nora marks the beginning of her new life without her husband:

> There was nothing for it but to go away, to go out the gate and down the street, to become another women and I did. No longer a wife not yet penitent and not yet whore. A bit of all three (49).

The fact that Nora considers herself a bit of a whore suggests that she has internalized and accepted the patriarchal absolutes in

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their descriptions of women as being only, virgin, Madonna and whore. No room is left for the category woman.

Although Nora leaves Jude, and eventually murders her lover Hart, she recognizes Jude as one of the real targets, in addition to her father and Dr.Rat:

> Cite him [Dr.Rat] or cite Jude with his commercial traveller's kit of assorted romantic bilge. Yes indeed if I had killed wisely that is to say judiciously then Jude would be a gonner. Jude should be the one that I struck down and left for his aghast family to identify, to have an inquest on, to cremate or bury (132).

Hart becomes the scapegoat for all the patriarchal presences in Nora's life. What she finally realizes is that in killing him, she has also killed a part of herself: "undoubtedly I saw my own begging helpless self reflected in him and I took a pillow from under the bed cover and placed it across his contorted face" (199). At the end of this novel, Nora is awaiting her death sentence. Once again, the pressures of living in a patriarchal society sound the death knell for the female self. Marriage has proved to be one more toll of the bell.

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In *Time and Tide*, we discover a similar relationship between Nell and Walter. Walter fits the profile of Eugene, Jude, Herod and Dr.Flaggler. He displays the same possessive and controlling qualities as these previous husbands. He considers himself superior to Nell, and frequently ignores her, or denigrates her efforts. "She was afraid of him. She was obedient" (12). Again the "eternal girl" pattern emerges. He husband assumes the master's role early in their relationship. "Walter made sarcastic remarks about her brainlessness" (13). The alienation continues, and we recognize the signs of a failing marriage:

> Things between them had been dire. Her husband and she lived in mortal enmity, and whereas once upon a time she had gone into his study in the evening for little friendly chats, she now saw him only when she delivered his tray with his meals. The children were allowed in for an hour before bedtime. He played music, classical music, most of the day, and in the afternoons, from three to five faithfully, he took a walk. Nell could not say exactly what went wrong, so wrong they were no longer retrievable. Formerly, he had his periods of huff; he would not talk, except to issue an edict or make a stinging remark, but after a few days he would relent, put his arms around her, taking her unawares, and say what a grump he was (20).

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Nell. like Nora is being frozen out of the relationship. She is at the mercy of Walter's whims and lives in perpetual fear. "She felt powerless: she was afraid of him, just as she was afraid of her neighbour. afraid of everyone" (21). This is the classic behavior of an abused woman who has been conditioned to be afraid of life. When Nell finally moves out. after much emotional turmoil. she dedicates the rest of her life to her sons. She remains a mere shell of a woman. and smothers her sons with a suffocating love. She clings to them like barnacles on a ship. forcing them to leave in order to breathe. The patriarchal influence has again been internalized. While she has failed as dutiful daughter. and servile wife. she has played her role as clutching Madonna to the hilt. This crushing dependence on the males in her life leaves her crippled and unable to stand alone.

In previous chapters I have already mentioned the shaky relationship between Josie and James in *The House of Splendid Isolation.* While James may differ in looks, and sensibility to the aforementioned husbands, he is, nevertheless, brutal and insensitive in his own uncouth way. A rough farmer and horse owner, he treats his wife like one of his animals. There is no tenderness in the

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union. Ironically, despite the ups and downs of their relationship, and his physical abuse, Josie remains with him until his death. Their relationship had evolved from that of husband and wife, to one of nurse and patient. Perhaps it was possible to stay when their roles were reversed, and Josie assumed the role of authority. It was not exactly an ideal marriage, but Josie got the house she had always wanted. She finds a measure of peace in her *House of Splendid Isolation.*

LOVERS

Lovers are fairly predictable in O'Brien's novels. Like most of the husbands they seem to fit a certain mold. They are usually married men who are having trouble with their wives or mistresses, who use the female protagonists, and eventually leave them stranded. This could be said of Mr. Gentleman of *The Country Girls*, Eugene of *The Lonely Girl*, Hugh Whistler of *August is a Wicked Month*, Moriarty of *Night*, Dee of *I Hardly Knew You*, and Father John Scanlon of *House of Splendid Isolation.* All of these

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characters use the protagonists. promise them love. and then dump them unceremoniously.

Only two lovers defy this stereotype: Auro of *Casualties of Peace*. seems genuinely concerned about Willa's welfare. and reads her pathetic letters after her death. However, their relationship never gets a chance to sour. as it is nipped in the bud by circumstance. Hart. of *I Hardly Knew You*. also seems a kind and generous younger man with a heart. However, his seizure during their lovemaking precipitates his death. There are few. if any. lasting romantic relationships in any of O'Brien's works. The patriarchal environment is neither conducive to gentleness nor to the trust necessary for a true relationship.

SONS

Mother-son relationships are perhaps the most authentic male-female connections in any of O'Brien's work. She admitted in a recent reading at New York University (February 23, 1998) that she considered the mother-son connection as the strongest tie of all. Perhaps that is because she herself has two grown sons and basks in

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their emotional support. It is on behalf of her son or sons as the case may be, that we see the paradox of the wounded woman present itself. These numerous, passive, pluckless heroines become absolute tigresses when fighting for their children. What they seem incapable of doing for themselves, they accomplish readily for their sons.

Although sons play small parts in several novels, because the protagonists are so self-absorbed in their own problems, they are always important. When the husband wants to devastate the wife, he threatens to take her children. I have already related some examples of this previously. It is not until *Time and Tide* that O'Brien examines the mother-son bond in depth. Nell's son, Paddy, drowns in the Thames, and Nell spends the entire novel trying to come to grips with this tragedy. She must also mend the breach between herself and her one surviving son, Tristan, whom she over-protected and smothered with affection so much that he is forced to move away from her. Nell's motherly anguish is tempered only by her dogged refusal to give up hope of a reconciliation. She has lost one son, Paddy, and is not about to lose Tristan. She must subdue her tendency to cling, allow him his own space and pray that

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he will end their alienation. A reconciliation of sorts takes place, but not without tremendous restraint on Nell's part. She finally learns to let go in order to keep.

Church fathers, biological fathers, husbands, and lovers are all given short shrift in the works of Edna O'Brien. By such negative portrayals of males we see the ramifications of rigid patriarchal practices on the hearts and minds of both males and females. While the females are the obvious victims here, the males are victimized too. By devaluing the feminine, they have unwittingly cut themselves off from the female sides of themselves. They are permanently off center, lead lop-sided existences, and end up losing more than they gain. The flint of their authoritarian philosophy has entered their psyches, and petrified their souls. O'Brien, for all her anger, leaves us to pity them, for they know not what they do.

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CHAPTER FIVE

"I wanted to give a voice to those without a voice" (Edna O'Brien, Reading at New York University, February 23, 1998).

GIVING VOICE TO THE FEMALE

In my introduction to this study of the "scandalous women" in O'Brien's fiction I expressed my fascination with the author's dogged refusal to let go of the theme, like a dog clinging to the an old bone long after the choice bits of meat have been stripped away. What I neglected to notice, what the dog instinctively knew, was that there was even sweeter sustenance in the marrow, below the surface. It is sometimes necessary to penetrate the outer layers of things to find the real essence. This has been true for the work of Edna O'Brien, which provoked me to take a spiritual and historical journey in search of the documented and undocumented experience of women and try to name, not blame, the forces that prevented so many of her anti-heroines from reaching authenticity, autonomy or wholeness. What made the self-actualization process for these women so difficult? What made it so hard for them to find a voice?

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I found that in ancient Nature cultures where goddesses were acknowledged. femininity was valued. With the advent of the Greek warrior cultures. while the goddess acquired a more military stance. her power had diminished, but she was still revered. This changed considerably when Christianity appropriated the old Celtic myths in Ireland. and while permitting the documentation of the existence of several goddesses. because they could not be erased from the folk mind. selectively canonized some. and demonized others. Nevertheless. there was room for female power and influence. until after the Great Famine of the nineteenth century when the needs of farmers superseded the needs of women.

Add to this, the restraints of Victorianism, Jansenisn, Nationalism, and the institutionalization of motherhood by both the Catholic Church and the Irish Constitution, and we get a glimpse of the Herculean forces acting to subdue and control women. Given this climate, is in any wonder that subservient, passive women emerge? Despite the evidence I have offered that some strong women did come forth and make their voices count, they were few and far between, and I had to dig pretty deep to uncover their stories. Moreover, there were probably hundreds of courageous

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women down the ages, who made valuable contributions to society, as Margaret MacCurtain suggests, but who was around to record or acknowledge them?

My goal in studying O'Brien's work was to give support to the side that was losing. O'Brien gives voice to the women who are marginalized by culture--women for whom one mistake in a patriarchal society spells ostracism, who are expelled from the tribe. What O'Brien forces us to consider are the positive and negative ramifications of such expulsion.

On the negative side, many of these women are relegated to alien status. They are shunned and held in contempt by the males of society, who perpetuate the patriarchal, authoritarian status quo. These women are also avoided by more orthodox females, who have accepted the roles for women's behavior according to a male gospel, and fear the same treatment. These orthodox women have, in fact, internalized the oppressor's view of them. Women have to be confident in their sense of self-worth to confront the inequities of the prevailing system. However, all are victims. Though some of the male victims control the power, this is essentially only external power.

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On the positive side, when women realize that they have the means to access their own inner power, as Mary MacNamara finally does in *Down By the River*, by finding the courage to sing her song, thus asserting the beginnings of selfhood, feminine authenticity begins to emerge. "Woman's exile from the center of action has prepared her for moral enlightenment" (Heilbrun, *Reinventing Womanhood*, 169). The fact that many women have been relegated to the sidelines has removed them from the spotlight. Consequently, this position in the shadows has ironically predisposed women to introspection and awareness. This could be considered the irony of banishment. However, these victims must move beyond pain, confront the real demons of their experience, name them, absolve them, and distance them. Women must do this for themselves. "One sex cannot be burdened by the psychic survival of the other" (189). If external power suppresses feminine autonomy, then this external power must either be confronted or ignored. It cannot continue to be allowed to dominate and denigrate the feminine. It cannot be allowed to penetrate a woman's psyche, and corrupt her opinion of herself.

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Universally, the devaluation of the feminine continues. Only recently, a television news report revealed how a flight attendant in India tried to comfort and protect a young twelve-year-old girl who sat crying alone at the back of the plane. She was dressed in traditional wedding garments, and, when questioned, related how her parents had sold her to a rich old man who was about seventy. The flight attendant followed up on the case, and found that the enormous Indian bureaucracy could do little to help. The parents did not want the daughter back: they needed the money. The old man, who was seated elsewhere on the plane, demanded his property. The case was unresolved. Apparently, it was not an isolated occurrence. In China, the orphanages are full of abandoned baby girls. The only boys to be found there are deformed or crippled in some way. Many Chinese and Indian women have abortions, after they learn through the technological advances of amnio centesis or sonar scans, that the fetuses are female.

In yet another recent television documentary, another aspect of the plight of girl children was exposed. Here, the ritual of sexual mutilation of girls was graphically filmed in all its literally gory detail. The patriarchs of certain Moslem groups insisted each young

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girl must have her clitoris removed (with a razor blade). or her vagina sewn up so she would not be tempted to enjoy the pleasures of sex. Later. it would take some of these little victims over an hour to complete the natural function of urination. Listening to their agonizing screams. as several male and female hands held them down. was heartrending. I speak here not of dark-age mentality. but of barbaric rituals being practiced in the United States in 1998.

When legal authorities tried to intervene on behalf of these little girls. they were told that it was an accepted part of this particular sect or culture. Some people are still working to prevent these atrocities. but they continue to exist. These are only a few current examples of the perpetuation of patriarchy and its ramification for females.

As O'Brien teaches us, we cannot continue to undervalue the feminine, relegate the female experience to the rubbish heap, and continue to say nothing in protest. If we do, we allow that evil to exist. We must risk the attacks of the wielders of power and express our indignation. We must expose the forces that make it impossible for some women and girl children to live authentic lives. We cannot afford to waste the vast potential of the feminine spirit,

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and assign it to a permanent prison. When a society denies any of its members the means of self-fulfillment by repressing the feminine. it devalues itself. The goal for all must be one of equanimity. No one should be absolutely dependent. or absolutely superior.

O'Brien. by cataloguing the plight of the weakened anti-heroine. makes us take a closer look at the forces that contribute to her paralysis. O'Brien reveals the symptoms of this female malady. The reader can diagnose the disease. and discern its causes. However. each of us. in her or his own individual way. must provide the remedy.

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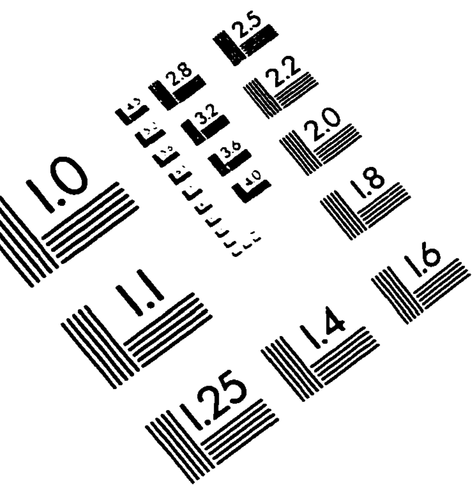

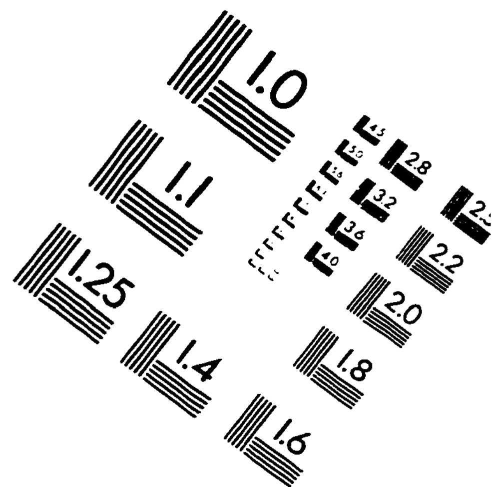

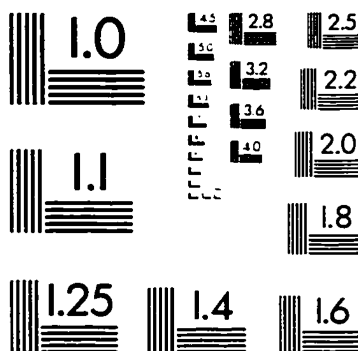

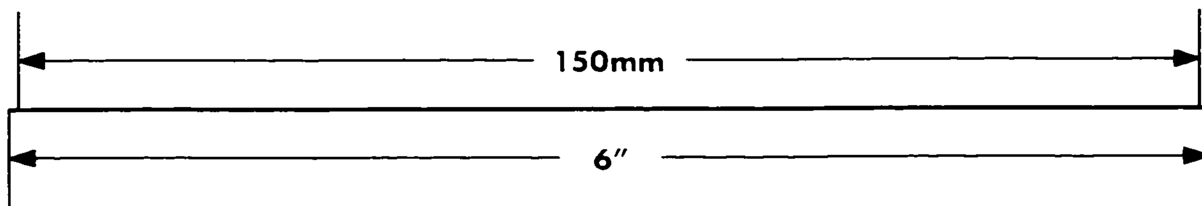

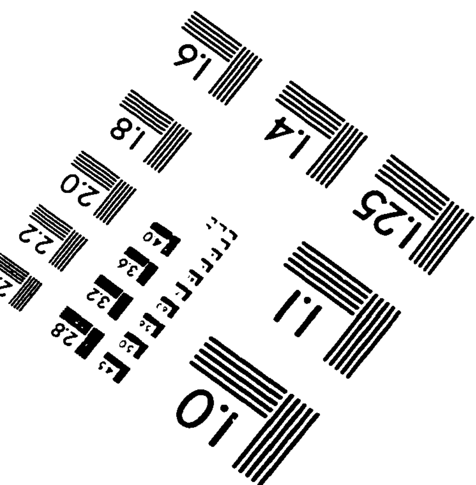

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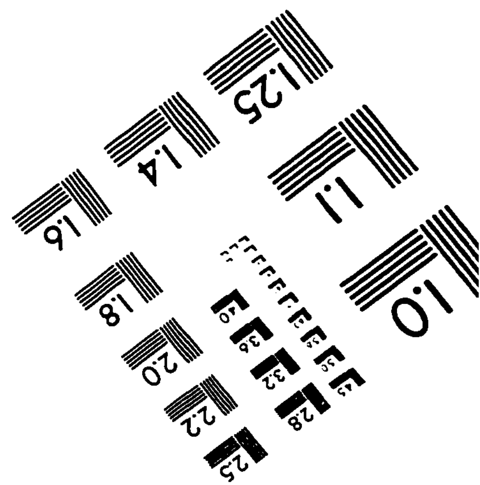

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