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(Un)Silencing the Voices of the Country Girls: A Journey into Twentieth-Century Irish Girlhood
through the Fiction of Edna O'Brien

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(Un)Silencing the Voices of the Country Girls: A Journey into Twentieth-Century

Irish Girlhood through the Fiction of Edna O'Brien

Siobhan Mary Dunbar

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the Collaborative M.A. degree in English Literature and Women's Studies

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ABSTRACT

Edna O'Brien is a prolific and highly successful contemporary Irish novelist, short story writer, and playwright. Her first six novels were banned in 1960s Ireland and since then, her subversive writing about Irish women's lives has often sparked controversy and debate in and even beyond her Irish homeland.

This thesis explores O'Brien's portrayal of rural Irish girlhood in post-Independence, twentieth-century Ireland in the novels *The Country Girls* (1960), *A Pagan Place* (1970), the short story collection *Returning* (1982), as well as the later novel *Down by the River* (1997). Chapter One delves into the mother-daughter bond in O'Brien's fiction. Chapter Two, in turn, examines the often painful father-daughter relationship. Finally, Chapter Three discusses O'Brien's complex portrayal of female sexuality. This study argues that O'Brien constructs powerful and haunting fictional voices of "Irish girlhood" and through them, makes a unique contribution to the Irish *Bildungsroman* tradition. Her fiction points to some of the immense challenges confronted by young adolescent girls in mid-to-late twentieth-century Ireland, not only in their homes but also within their relationships, schools, and rural communities.

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INTRODUCTION

When people are cross with me for writing, Irish people or other critics, sometimes they say, why do I tell these stories that have a lot of darkness in them? And I say, as a writer I want to get the beauty of life but I also want to get the subsoil. I want to turn that soil over and find anything that I can find. It's not necessarily dirt, it's what I call truth, and many people take issue with that (O'Brien on *Open Source*).

Edna O'Brien is a prolific and highly successful contemporary Irish writer who has, to date, published seventeen novels and six short story collections, in addition to writing poetry, children's books, stage-plays, television plays, screenplays, newspaper editorials, a personal memoir, and even a biography of James Joyce. Rebecca Pelan, one of the leading Irish scholars who specializes in O'Brien's fiction, points out that O'Brien "remains unchallenged as the most widely-published and distributed Irish woman writer of the modern period" ("Stage-Irish" 67). Although O'Brien has achieved much recognition and commercial success on an international scale since the publication of her first novel, *The Country Girls*, in 1960, her writing has often been cloaked in controversy, especially in her native Ireland. Over the past four decades, O'Brien has courageously confronted subjects in her writing that have been widely seen as taboo in her Irish homeland such as: pre-marital sex, extra-marital affairs, lesbian desire, domestic abuse, abortion, suicide, alcoholism, sexual assault, and incest. Through her female protagonists, O'Brien has shed significant light on the emotions, hardships, and sexualities of women and adolescent girls in twentieth-

century, post-Independence Ireland in a frank, sensitive, scathing-yet-witty style that was unprecedented and initially very unwelcome in her Irish village of Tuamgraney in County Clare in the 1960s, and in Ireland as a whole.

O'Brien was born in Tuamgraney in 1932, attended Pharmaceutical College in Dublin in the late 1940s, married Czech writer Ernest Gebler in 1951 (they divorced in 1964), and left Ireland in 1959 for England (Eckley 26). After being offered fifty pounds to write a novel by a publishing company employee, for whom she worked as a copyeditor, O'Brien wrote *The Country Girls* in three weeks, very shortly after arriving in London. The novel was inspired, in part, by her own experiences as a girl growing up in 1940s Ireland, and she has explained that she "never ceased crying as she was writing it" as she was "so lonely for Ireland and nature and companionship" (O'Brien to Swaim).

The novel was published in 1960; however, in an outraged response to the frank honesty of her prose, the Irish Censorship Board immediately banned *The Country Girls* in 1960 for being "obscene." Her six subsequent books met the same fate: her writing was deemed "a smear on Irish womanhood" (O'Brien to Carlson 76). Furthermore, the priest from her village parish publicly burned three discovered copies of her "illegal" first novel. In the 1960s and early 1970s, O'Brien's Irish readers would have had to purchase her novels in Great Britain and then "smuggle" them into Ireland; nonetheless, her fiction quickly attained commercial success, particularly in England and the United States.

Undoubtedly, the intense public backlash that was sparked in Ireland from the moment of O'Brien's literary debut has largely contributed to her decision to remain in London, where she has written her many works and continues to write to the present day. O'Brien has remarked that in Ireland she felt "the climate of censorship was strangulating. But although

you physically leave the country, mentally you bring it with you” (Swaim). Thus, like her greatest literary role model, James Joyce, O’Brien has exiled herself from her native country. Nonetheless, Ireland continues to remain a profound part of her consciousness and of her writing, so that she still refers to County Clare in the rural West of Ireland as “the fount and source of all my writing ”(O’Brien on *Open Source*).

Attacked from all Sides: Scholarly Criticism and Public Controversy

While O’Brien has been called the “Irish Faulkner” (Pearce 6) and “perhaps the greatest living Irish prose writer along with William Trevor” (Barra), she has also encountered a wide range of often scathing and intensely personal criticisms throughout her literary career. While conducting my research, I was particularly struck by the intensity and sheer volume of this negative criticism of O’Brien when looked at in relation to the extant body of criticism on her work as a whole. To cite one of the central, recurring criticisms made about O’Brien and her work, she has been accused, particularly by Irish critics, of being too “stage-Irish” (Pelan, ““Stage-Irish”” 67). In other words, critics argue that she publicly displays “deliberate, stylized, highly theatrical stagings of the self” which are “knowingly and gleefully marketed” (Colletta and O’Connor 5) and that she is “so open and roguish ... in weaving her obvious spell” (P. O’Brien 475) in order to appeal commercially to her widespread American and British readership. While it is of course entirely possible that O’Brien is at least partially complicit in promoting a particular image of herself in the media, the same could be said of almost all successful celebrity figures, and this critique alone seems to be a highly insubstantial reason for her work to be diminished or dismissed by critics. Another common criticism of O’Brien is that her work is too obviously autobiographical, which some critics have interpreted as a serious weakness of her craft and

even supposedly as evidence of psychological instability in the author. For example, American critic Peggy O'Brien argues that O'Brien's characters are "projections of a turbulent authorial psyche" (473) and that *The Country Girls* "leaves an indelible impression as the recreation of an extreme mental state" (478). These comments arguably seek to stereotype O'Brien as a female writer through their implications that she is somehow an "emotionally unstable" woman who is merely attempting to resolve her own personal "issues" in her fiction and who cannot maintain adequate authorial distance from her work.

Intense media attention has also been paid to O'Brien's "striking" physical appearance and to her "Irishness" throughout her career, and these remarks frequently rely upon demeaning stereotypes about Irish women. For example, in one *New York Times* review from 1989, O'Brien was described as an "Irish beauty with red hair and green eyes" (Woodward 42), thus equating her with the stereotypical, romanticized vision of an "Irish colleen" (Morgan 453). Furthermore, this same reviewer referred to her as "naturally kooky and superstitious" (Woodward 42), plainly invoking the stereotype that the Irish are inherently superstitious due to their culture's strong oral tradition of Celtic legends and myths.

Finally, O'Brien's portrayal of female sexuality was perhaps most fiercely attacked, particularly by the Catholic Church, the Irish government, and by conservative literary critics in the 1960s and 70s. While one Irish reviewer called her writing "exhibitionistic" (*The Irish Times*, 21 Nov. 1966, qtd. in Eckley 13), another British critic labeled her novels as "gift-wrapped porn ... one long act of public literary masturbation" (*Times Literary Supplement*, 6 Oct. 1972, qtd. in Pelan 71).

Interestingly, O'Brien has also rather defiantly acknowledged that she is "not the darling of the feminists" (Plimpton 251), since some second-wave feminists, particularly in the United States and England, viewed her female characters as being too domestic and overly-consumed by the subject of men and notions of romantic love. Eileen Morgan points out that "as American feminism developed, literary critics sought more empowering images of women and motherhood than O'Brien's novels provided" (454). Despite these criticisms of O'Brien by some feminists, James M. Cahalan argues that "it is unfortunate if O'Brien is left outside the feminist circle-- especially since the critique that one finds in her fiction of women's victimization by men is a valuable feminist lesson" (114).

This backlash against O'Brien, which has lasted throughout most if not her entire career thus far, seems to point to a much larger, more complex issue involving highly restrictive social expectations and stereotypes about the "Irish female writer." Shedding light upon these restrictive attitudes, in a 1988 interview, when asked if she thought the position of women in Ireland made it more difficult for the woman writer, O'Brien responded, "It does because she's not supposed to write. (A) she's supposed to keep her thoughts to herself. And (B) she's supposed to be doing maternal, domestic, useful things; not things that are the provenance of a man" (Carlson 75). Thus, O'Brien is also keenly aware of the fact that many of the criticisms she has received are not directly personal but are really symptomatic of a dominant patriarchal culture existent both within and outside of Ireland and its tendency to be wary of or even shun the female artist.

As Andrea Greenwood remarks in her 2003 biography on O'Brien, "continuing constructions of O'Brien as 'Celtic,' exotic and sexually 'dangerous' have severely limited her status as a writer" (13). Greenwood describes how the public obsession with O'Brien's

“persona” has undermined the cultural and historical significance of her work, as well as its subversive ability to convey some of the challenges and oppressions faced by Irish women in a post-Independent Irish patriarchal society. Indeed, Greenwood points out that it has really only been in the past decade that scholarly criticism on O’Brien has begun to acknowledge and re-assess her value and contributions as a writer who is clearly worthy of academic study. Greenwood remarks that the real “turning point” in terms of O’Brien criticism came about in 1996, when the *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies (CJIS)* published its *Special Edition on Edna O’Brien*, in which O’Brien’s work was critiqued from post-colonial, psychoanalytical, and feminist perspectives (8). Furthermore, in April 2005, the first academic conference on O’Brien, entitled “Edna O’Brien: A Reappraisal,” was held at the National University of Ireland, Galway, and, in June 2006, O’Brien received the first Ulysses Medal for Literature from University College Dublin for her outstanding literary contributions (“UCD Ulysses Medal”). With these recent developments, O’Brien’s work has finally gained a firm footing in academia and has begun to receive the serious critical and scholarly attention this entails both within and outside of Ireland.

“Reappraising” O’Brien

In admiration of her predecessors such as Jane Austen and Emily Brontë, Virginia Woolf declared in *A Room of One’s Own*, “but how impossible it must have been for them not to budge either to the right or to the left. What genius, what integrity it must have required in the face of all that criticism, in the midst of that purely patriarchal society, to hold fast to the thing as they saw it without shrinking” (68). Woolf’s praise for the inner strength of these writers in refusing to be swayed by the intense criticisms they received can also be similarly bestowed upon O’Brien. As O’Brien explained in a recent interview with *The Irish Times*,

“You see, for all the criticism, through my books I have a voice. It’s heard and I use it. I take in my little corner of experience and register and retell it” (Battersby 18). Thus, following in the footsteps of writers like Brontë and Austen, O’Brien has demonstrated an unwavering persistence to write things “as she sees them” from her “own little corner of experience,” in the midst of intense criticisms from across the political spectrum.

Evidently, O’Brien has been unable to find a comfortable place amongst either a typically “left-wing” or “right-wing” readership. However, she seems most comfortable being on the outskirts of any particular political group, since she believes that the “correct position is to write the truth, to write what one feels regardless of any public consideration or any clique. I think an artist never takes a position either through experience or umbrage” (Roth 109). It can be argued that the very controversy that O’Brien’s writing has frequently generated is evidence of its potentially positive capacity to provoke change, to spark questions and dialogue and to charge, both emotionally and politically, her diverse readership of critics and fans alike. Through this thesis, I hope to contribute to the positive “reappraisal” of O’Brien currently taking place within academia and to provide further evidence of the significant scholarly, literary, cultural, and feminist value of her work.

O’Brien’s Echoing Voices of Rural Irish Girlhood

In particular, this thesis will examine O’Brien’s novels and stories which feature the theme of “Irish girlhood” and what it meant to grow up as an adolescent girl between the ages of twelve and sixteen in mid-to-late twentieth-century rural Ireland. Out of the many works within O’Brien’s impressive *oeuvre*, I have decided to focus my analysis specifically upon her novels *The Country Girls* (1960), *A Pagan Place* (1970), her short story collection *Returning* (1982) and her later novel *Down by the River* (1997). These novels and stories

were specifically chosen because they all feature startlingly similar young female voices that echo throughout these works and are simultaneously tragic, insightful, defiant, and at times even frightening and haunting in their narrations of deeply troubled childhoods. Although there are many evident similarities between these characters, each subsequent characterization of the adolescent girl in O'Brien's fiction adds multiple layers and nuances to her portrayal of this figure and allows us to travel even further into the minds and lives of her young heroines.

Collectively, the protagonists in these works allow the voice of the rural Irish Catholic girl to be heard, a figure who had previously been largely silenced within Irish literature. This literary silencing of Irish women in general has been remarked upon by Rebecca Pelan, who argues that prior to O'Brien, Irish writing had historically been dominated by "masculine" themes and by writers such as W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, and Patrick Kavanagh. As she explains:

Within such a spectrum of writing, which deals in various thematic and formalistic ways with the Irish cultural identity, there is a silence—that of the rural, Catholic woman whose identity, by her absence, is seen to be non-existent. In recording that particular world, O'Brien performed one of the most important functions in women's writing—that of turning the female absence into a presence. ("World of Nora Barnacle" 51)

Thus, in this thesis, I will argue that in the aforementioned works, O'Brien constructs a unique, complex, and even disturbing psychological pathway into these young girls' lives, and by digging into the "subsoil," she brings their voices out of literary silence.

O'Brien and the Irish female *Bildungsromane*

Furthermore, all of these works can be viewed as female *Bildungsromane*s, in that they are primarily concerned with the psychological growth of a young girl in a particular stage of her development, journeying towards a greater understanding of herself and of the world around her.¹ Therefore, through these works, O'Brien offers the Irish Catholic girl her own place within the Irish *Bildungsroman* tradition, alongside Joyce's more well-known and celebrated young Irish hero, Stephen Dedalus.² María Amor Barros del Río describes *The Country Girls* as "an innovative model in the Irish literary stage as far as female *Bildungsromane* are concerned." This study will further expand upon Barros del Río's assertion by examining how O'Brien has powerfully contributed to the Irish *Bildungsroman* tradition not only in her first novel, but throughout her literary career. This project will take an in-depth look at several of O'Brien's works of fiction portraying young female adolescents' lives not only in the rural Ireland of the 1940s and 50s, but also of the 1990s, and compare and contrast their similar yet intensely individual journeys of self-development.

Several critical works published about the female *Bildungsromane* have argued that young female heroines in this genre face unique challenges and obstacles within their patriarchal societies, when compared to the male hero, in their quest for self-actualization.³ As further evidence of this argument, in O'Brien's works, this journey towards self-awareness, fulfillment and independence is attempted with considerable determination by each of her heroines, but it is often thwarted at every turn within their homes and communities. Indeed, in all of these selected works, this journey involves great suffering and

loss and her protagonists' desires to escape from their painful pasts in order to find their own unique voices are, in many ways, still unfulfilled by the novels' and stories' conclusions.

The Trials and Traumas of Girlhood in Twentieth-Century Ireland

Through O'Brien's female protagonists' often difficult lives, the reader is offered an insight into some of the social, political and cultural issues relevant to her twentieth-century Irish society, and, particularly, how these complex factors affect young Irish girls. In each of these works, O'Brien's young female protagonists all cope with strained emotional relationships with their mothers, physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse at the hands of their fathers, and sexual oppression, exploitation and violence in their communities. In *Down by the River* (1997), O'Brien bases her narrative upon the well-known "Case of X"--the true story of a fourteen-year-old girl in 1990s Ireland who experienced tremendous challenges as a victim of sexual abuse struggling for her right to have an abortion. Although this novel is set half a century later than O'Brien's earlier fictions, the young protagonist in *Down by the River* strongly resembles her Irish heroines of the 1940s, through her sensitive, reflective, yet ultimately courageous and quietly defiant character. O'Brien consistently portrays the interlocking oppressions that her protagonists face-- not only in their homes, but also in the outside world, in an Irish patriarchal society that is perpetuated and maintained by both men and women.

The three chapters which constitute this thesis trace the psychological and physical journeys of O'Brien's young female heroines, and focus most intensely upon her impressionable young protagonists' relationships with the most influential figures in their lives. Chapter One discusses O'Brien's female protagonists' early psychological and emotional development, as these both originate in and are strongly rooted by their

relationships with their mothers. This first chapter opens with a brief discussion of Irish women's circumstances in a patriarchal culture both in the 1940s and 1990s, since this oppressive climate ultimately affected both mothers and daughters. It will then explore the strong parallels in all of these works between her young protagonists' complex, emotionally intense, and often painful relationships with their mothers.

Chapter Two will delve into her protagonists' first unforgettable confrontations with some of the dangers of patriarchy through the complexities of their relationships with their fathers. O'Brien's father figures are portrayed as violent, angry, yet tragically lonely and troubled men who are frequently capable of being physically, emotionally, and/or sexually abusive towards their daughters, particularly while under the influence of alcohol. While the focus is primarily upon the feelings and experiences of O'Brien's young heroines themselves, these two chapters also seek to consider the perspectives of O'Brien's mothers and fathers. Therefore, these chapters will touch upon some of the complex cultural factors that play a role in the mothers' and fathers' unstable behaviour as parents, which, in turn, often results in increased turmoil and hardships in their daughters' lives.

Finally, this thesis concludes in Chapter Three with a discussion of O'Brien's young protagonists' growing awareness of their own sexualities as they become young women, and some of the challenges and undeserved punishments they receive from both men and women, in many cases, simply for having a female body. This final chapter will analyse her fictional portrayal of Irish female sexuality and the ways in which O'Brien's protagonists internalize and are negatively influenced by some of the pervasive and destructive cultural messages about sex. This section also demonstrates how her protagonists are shaped not only by their parents, but also by their communities as they become young women.

Collectively, these three chapters touch upon what are arguably the most crucial factors affecting a young adolescent girl's life—her relationship with her mother and father, as well as her feelings about her sexuality and her sense of identity as a young woman.

When Philip Roth commented to O'Brien in a 1984 interview, "Not all writers feast on their childhood as much as you have," she significantly responded that "the time when you are most alive and most aware is in childhood and one is trying to recapture that heightened awareness" (104). Throughout her literary career, O'Brien has poignantly and powerfully recreated this "heightened awareness" of childhood, in that her young female protagonists in all of these works absorb their surroundings deeply and experience their emotions with an intensity that makes the hardships they endure all the more painful in their young lives. She imaginatively echoes the voices of "Irish girlhood" with a skill that is evident even in her varied use of perspective and narrative voice within these works.⁴

Ultimately, through each of these stories of "Irish girlhood," O'Brien reveals the immense vulnerability of her adolescent, rural female heroines both within and outside of their homes. She reveals the fragility of childhood "innocence," if it truly exists at all in O'Brien's fictional Irish world. Her young protagonists experience inner peace and the freedom to be themselves only in rare moments of happiness, and she demonstrates that children are often affected profoundly by tragedy. For example, in the following passage from O'Brien's novel *Down by the River*, Mary's attorney, Cathal, suddenly realizes that Mary has been sexually abused by her father:

Neither moved and he allowed her to cry and cry, her whole body yielding to it, overflowing, a full and awful consummation, and he thought to himself that there is really no such thing as youth, there is only luck, and the enormity of something

which can happen, whence a person, any person, is brought deeper and more profoundly into sorrow, and once they have gone there, they can't come back, they have to live in it, live in that dark, and find some glimmer in it. (*DBTR* 203)

This powerful citation leads into the themes explored in this thesis, since O'Brien's young female protagonists have been made to "live in that dark" of their difficult lives, and are each faced with the challenge of "find[ing] some glimmer in it."

Where Fact and Fiction Meet

These characters seem to be inspired, in part, by O'Brien's memories of her own girlhood growing up in 1940s rural Ireland. As O'Brien explains, her writing and her characters "spring from a fusion of fact, feeling and imagination" (Carlson 73). Upon listening to several of O'Brien's personal interviews throughout her career, it became apparent that her own relationship with her parents as well as her upbringing in her rural Irish community have played a significant role in her fictional depictions of Irish girlhood. In fact, it is not uncommon to find aspects of an author's own experiences embedded, on some level, within the *Bildungsroman* (Labovitz 3). For this reason, this thesis contains some excerpts from O'Brien's interviews from various decades of her literary career. It is my intention that these biographical inclusions might add a further layer of context and meaning to the discussion of "Irish girlhood" and offer the reader one more potential way to approach the themes of O'Brien's writing. However, this thesis certainly does not aim to pigeonhole O'Brien's fiction as being solely a biographical depiction of her own life, nor does it strive to prove that her work is somehow an "objective" depiction of her twentieth-century Irish society. Rather, it seeks to acknowledge the autobiographical and sociological factors that may have influenced O'Brien's psychologically-rich depiction of young Irish

girls growing up in twentieth-century rural Ireland, and to explore their complicated and challenging journeys towards womanhood.

Notes

¹ Esther Kleinbord Labovitz describes a traditional *Bildungsroman* as having the following key characteristics: “Containing autobiographical elements, with more or less uniformity, it described the process of development and education of a single protagonist from childhood through adolescence, leaving him at the threshold of maturity. The childhood of a youngster of some sensibility is treated and illustrated, schooling as formal education may be shown as a frustrating element in the child’s life, while new options for learning may present themselves as the adolescent reaches out to the world around him. Generally, the protagonist is shown in conflict with generations and with educators within the pedagogic community, especially as contact with the outside world is made. Throughout the course of the novel, the inner life of the protagonist and his self-actualization become an important element along with the unfolding of the whole person” (3-4). Although this definition may be typically describing the male hero of the *Bildungsroman*, it is evident that O’Brien employs many of the central elements of this genre in these works centred upon her young female heroines.

² In her article “Edna O’Brien’s *A Pagan Place* and the Irish Bildungsroman Tradition,” Kathryn L. Kleypas defends O’Brien’s 1970 novel, and argues that when comparing this female coming-of-age narrative with Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, it should not be found lacking as a “second rate Bildungsroman” in any sense, but should be appreciated for the “intricate and nuanced devices in the novel” (64). This article provides further evidence of the current scholarly “re-appraisal” taking place of O’Brien’s work, since Kleypas argues that O’Brien’s novel should not be considered as merely a less successful version of Joyce’s Irish *bildungsroman* but should be valued in its own right.

³ See Esther Kleinbord Labovitz, *The Myth of the Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in*

the Twentieth Century, New York: Peter Lang, 1986, Kathryn L. Kleypas, "Edna O'Brien's *A Pagan Place* and the Irish Bildungsroman Tradition" in *New Voices in Irish Criticism*. Ed. P.J. Matthews, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000, and Susan Fraiman, *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and The Novel of Development*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. All of these works acknowledge that the female *bildungsroman* necessarily differs from the male *bildungsroman*, due to complex sociological factors that often impose greater obstacles in the female heroines' journeys towards self-actualization (which, for the purposes of this study, can be defined as a sense of living to one's fullest potential).

⁴ Beyond providing further evidence of O'Brien's unique take on the theme of "Irish childhood," an explanation of her experimentation with narrative technique will also enable the readers of this thesis to better understand my alternating use of the terms "protagonist," and "narrator" in my discussion of her works. Essentially, *The Country Girls* and her short stories in *Returning* are told by a first-person narrator, who, in *The Country Girls* is called Cait, while in *Returning*, she is un-named and is therefore referred to throughout my thesis as simply "the narrator." In *A Pagan Place*, O'Brien uses a second-person narrative technique so that the protagonist describes herself as "you" throughout the novel, and when I refer to her I also call her "the narrator," being careful to specify which novel she narrates. Finally, *Down by the River* has a more traditional, third-person omniscient narrator and so this character is referred to in my thesis as O'Brien's "protagonist," Mary. Overall, when I refer to O'Brien's young female characters as a group from all four works, I shall call them collectively "protagonists" or "heroines."

CHAPTER ONE:

Marked by the Mother: The Haunting Power of O'Brien's Mother-Daughter Relationships

In the novels *The Country Girls* (1960), *A Pagan Place* (1970), the short story collection *Returning* (1982), and the later novel *Down by the River* (1997), Edna O'Brien conveys the deep complexities and the often hidden tragedies of the family. O'Brien portrays how the family unit is the most crucial influence through which her young female protagonists learn about the world and about themselves, and one which inevitably haunts them as they journey towards womanhood. In these works, O'Brien suggests that the rural, Irish Catholic family home of the 1940s and even the 1990s is an environment that is often characterized by emotional, physical, and/or sexual abuse. O'Brien points to some of the complex social, cultural, and religious factors that have contributed to the immense disharmony and instability found within the rural Irish home of her fiction.

In particular, this chapter will focus upon the intensity and complexity of the mother-daughter relationship within O'Brien's writing. After briefly touching upon O'Brien's own relationship with her mother, the opening pages of this chapter will examine how O'Brien's writing subtly yet powerfully comments upon the political and religious construction of the "ideal" Irish Catholic mother in mid-twentieth century, post-Independent Ireland. This oppressive cultural climate is significant to discuss as it deeply affected both women and girls, as well as their relationships with one another as mothers and daughters. Framed by this cultural and political context, this chapter will then delve into the perspectives, experiences, and feelings of her young female protagonists with regards to their mothers. In

each of these works, O'Brien's adolescent characters often struggle with negative feelings of guilt, resentment and fear in their abusive homes, yet at other times, they also feel deep pity and compassion for the shortcomings and the oppressive plight of their mothers. In these moving stories reflecting upon the often ambivalent mother-daughter relationship, O'Brien's young female protagonists long to understand and reconcile with their mothers, even as they inevitably choose to escape the pain of their claustrophobic and traumatizing childhood homes.

True to Life: O'Brien's Mother-Daughter Tensions

As Claire Dederer aptly remarks, "O'Brien doesn't just believe in the power of the bond between generations. She fears it" (par. 15). O'Brien has stated in numerous interviews over the decades that she believes mothers have an overwhelming and even haunting influence upon their daughters' lives. In fact, O'Brien's own mother was vocal in her disapproval of her writing career and apparently felt ashamed and even personally betrayed by her daughter's frank literary honesty about issues that her mother felt should be kept private and behind closed doors. O'Brien spoke of the complex relationship she had with her mother in a recent interview: "My mother hated, went to her grave, shocked, outraged, that I was a writer. She saw that I had some gifts. She resented it and yet wanted us to be bound together. And that's very unnerving" (Freeman). It is significant to note that O'Brien dedicated *The Country Girls*, her first novel, "To My Mother," despite her mother's great disapproval of her writing. Sadly, after her mother's death, O'Brien found her mother's copy of *The Country Girls* hidden in a box with "all the offending words inked out" (O'Brien to Swaim) and the dedication page to her mother ripped out (Woodward 50). In an interview, O'Brien described the intensity of the emotion she felt in that moment upon realizing the depth of her

mother's shame: "She must have thought it was so *awful*. I wanted her to appear from the dead and confront me, I was that angry" (Woodward 50).

Perhaps drawing from some of her own painful and complex memories of her relationship with her mother, O'Brien explores the ways in which her young female protagonists are psychologically and emotionally marked and influenced by their mothers in all of these works.

Motherhood in Post-Independence, 1940s Ireland

In particular, through their mothers, O'Brien's daughter figures in *The Country Girls*, *A Pagan Place*, and *Returning* witness the ways in which women in 1940s Ireland are highly restricted in their personal options and freedoms. These works suggest that despite the Irish revolutionaries' promises of newfound economic prosperity and ideological freedom upon achieving Independence from England in 1922, the everyday life for rural Irish Catholic women in the 1940s remained oppressed and constricted in many ways. O'Brien's mothers are representative of the majority of Irish women of the time, in that they possess a minimal level of education and do not work outside of the home. Moreover, they are also victims of extremely unhappy and abusive marriages. Leaving one's husband at this time was very difficult, if not impossible, for several legal, economic and social reasons. Firstly, divorce was illegal in Ireland until 1995, secondly, many rural families lived in poverty in the 1940s, and some, even still, in the 1990s, and thirdly, it was a strong social taboo to separate from one's husband. As Yvonne Scannell reveals:

The battered wife and mother could not exclude her violent husband from the home (which was almost invariably his) except by resort to the most cumbersome

procedures. If she fled the home, her husband had a right to damages from anyone who enticed her away, or who harboured her or committed adultery with her. (73)

Thus, an Irish woman in such abusive situations had very few options for escaping her circumstances.

In her discussion of the Irish female identity in 1930s and 1940s Ireland, Maryann Valiulis reveals that women were strongly encouraged by the institutions of the Catholic church and the Irish government to confine themselves within the private, domestic sphere of the home. Although many women participated in various capacities in Ireland's battle for Independence (including actively fighting as revolutionaries), when the battles were over women were expected to settle back down, to create a comforting home for their husbands and children and to serve as the "guardians" of the national culture and religion. As Valiulis describes: "Political and ecclesiastical leaders argued that women needed to be returned to their rightful position within the home, a position some had vacated during the revolutionary struggle. Returning women to the home, these authorities declared, was essential to the stability of the family, the State, and a Catholic society" (154). Therefore, the social and political power that Irish women briefly possessed during Nationalist struggles was quickly taken away from them as soon as the goal of Independence was achieved by the State. The limited role prescribed to Irish women in post-Independence, 1940s Ireland is perhaps no more clearly emphasized than in Article 41.2 of the 1937 Constitution, written by Irish president and revolutionary Eamon de Valera, which states:

1. In particular the State recognizes that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.

2. The State shall therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.

(reproduced in Scannell 72)

These inclusions were viewed by many women's organizations of the time as a "betrayal" of the women who had fought for Independence (Ellis). Indeed, this Article had the effect of preventing most married women from working outside of the home in the 1940s and 50s, and was used to justify a compulsory retirement upon marriage for female civil servants and teachers (which were virtually the only occupations open to women at this time), since their jobs were viewed as "selfish distractions from home duties" (Scannell 74). Therefore, one can see how this Article strongly emphasized, or even ensured, that an Irish woman's proper "place" was within the home, tending to her husband and children.

The Virgin Mary and the Irish Mother

Evidently, the restrictive cultural and political climate of 1940s post-Independence Ireland placed great limitations on women, in that a rigidly-defined Irish Catholic female identity was socially constructed, upheld as the ideal, and enforced systematically. Valiusis further describes the "virtues" Irish Catholic women were supposedly meant to possess:

The ideal Irish Catholic woman was pure and good, with a particular appreciation for the beautiful, the pleasing. Implicit in this statement was a reiteration of the belief in woman as the angel in the house who creates a haven to which men can retreat after their sordid dealings in the world of political and economic power. (153)

Irish women were assigned the role of comforters and protectors of their families within the private sphere of the home, where they were expected to maintain a "pleasing" environment, both esthetically and emotionally. Jenny Beale goes on to explain how this ideological

construction of the Irish Catholic mother is based upon the maternal perfection of the Virgin Mary: “The image of the Catholic mother is very strong. She is glorified as a myth and woven into the ideal of the Catholic family. Mother is the spiritual and emotional foundation for the family, the source of love and affection and of moral values. ... It is an ideal which is clearly modeled on the image of Mary as mother of Jesus” (50). One can see how these descriptions of “the ideal Irish Catholic woman,” embedded within the Irish Constitution and the doctrines of the Catholic Church, created a straitjacket of unrealistic expectations placed upon Irish women, particularly in the early-to-mid twentieth century. In turn then, Nationalism, Independence, and the Catholic Church all contributed to a spurious idealization of Irish motherhood through the particular requirement that women embrace the role of a “pure,” self-sacrificing wife and mother in order to be seen as patriotic to their country and devoted to their faith.

Rural Irish Motherhood in 1992

It is highly significant to note that even in 1992, the year in which *Down by the River* is set, O’Brien’s rural mother appears to have achieved little social progress, and faces many of the same hardships as those endured by O’Brien’s 1940s mothers outlined previously. She is once again a housewife with little education, trapped in an abusive marriage from which she would still be legally unable to divorce, and continues to be confined by many similar notions about ideal Irish womanhood. Urban Ireland in the early 1990s brought some significant social and economic changes for women, with the first female Irish president, Mary Robinson, elected in 1990, increased secularization, many more women working outside the home or emigrating, and women experiencing a relatively greater degree of sexual freedom with the legalization of contraceptives in 1985 (Ingman, “Stretching

Boundaries” 261). However, despite these legal, social, and political changes that may have benefited some Irish women, O’Brien’s rural mother appears to be trapped in an almost timeless state in her husband’s farmhouse, linking her in an alarming, eerie way with the mothers O’Brien depicted almost half a century earlier and emphasizing the continuing challenges faced by the rural Irish Catholic woman towards the century’s close.

Striving to Create an Unattainable “Haven”: The Reality of O’Brien’s Mothers

If the Irish patriarchal ideologies discussed above, in and of themselves, do not constitute O’Brien’s rural mothers as prisoners, it is their husbands’ abusive and unpredictable behaviour and the palpable unhappiness pervading their daily lives that underscore their almost complete loss of autonomy and sense of being imprisoned. Due to their financial and social dependence upon their husbands, their experiences are, to a considerable extent, influenced, controlled, and defined by them. O’Brien’s fathers within each of these works are plagued by the self-destructive and tragic disease of alcoholism. The father is highly volatile and unpredictable and therefore very threatening to his family. O’Brien portrays the father as going on frequent drinking binges so that the family has no choice but to pray for his safety and anxiously await his return. He often disappears from the house for days at a time, taking large sums of money with him under the pretense of attending to his duties as a farmer or to “pay the rates” in town (O’Brien, *Country Girls* 9). Meanwhile, he is undoubtedly spending the family’s money at the pub or gambling on horse races and will arrive home days later, without warning, often in a drunken and violent rage.

O’Brien’s fathers’ destructive actions, which will be discussed in depth in Chapter Two, cause the mothers to endure a ceaseless cycle of self-torment during which they anxiously walk upon eggshells waiting for their husbands to succumb to alcohol. O’Brien’s mothers

oscillate from worry and despair when their husbands leave the home and they do not know their whereabouts, to intense but brief relief when their husbands are sober before this vicious cycle begins again. In *The Country Girls*, the novel's young narrator, Cait, describes this never-ending cycle of anxiety and relief that she witnesses in her mother: "Dada was in the hospital that day recovering from one of his drinking sprees and it was one of the few times I saw Mama happy. It was only for the few weeks immediately after his drinking that she could relax, before it was time to worry again about the next bout" (CG 13). Due to her husband's victimizing behaviour, Cait's mother feels that she must keep the peace at all costs as she fears that conflict with her husband will only push him to lash out at her either verbally or physically or leave the home to drink once again. In *A Pagan Place*, when the narrator's mother dares to question her husband's breeding costly racehorses when they are already in financial trouble, her husband tells her "to keep her gob shut, to stick the bacon up her arse" (PP 66) and begins to strike at their furniture and belongings with a stick. The mother immediately regrets speaking her mind as she now blames herself for her husband's leaving the home in a rage. As the narrator in *A Pagan Place* reveals, "She hung her head and sobbed. She would have taken any insult then because she did not want him to go out" (PP 67). In *Down by the River*, this violent, oppressive situation is intensified by the fact that the father sexually abuses his daughter, Mary. Consequently, the mother, trapped by her lack of options and her fear, is powerless to stop him or to speak of the horrible abuse, which O'Brien implies she is aware of: "There is something she wants to say. Maybe she can say it to the river. There is no one to talk to. There never was" (DBTR 37). O'Brien powerfully depicts this horrible cycle of abuse and the ways in which the fathers control and intimidate the young female narrators and their mothers.

In many ways, O'Brien's mothers are "angels in the house," who consistently attempt to place their husbands' personal problems and needs above their own well-being out of a pervasive sense of guilt and duty. As O'Brien writes in *Mother Ireland*, her personal memoir of the Ireland of her youth, "Mothers were best. Mothers worked and worried and sacrificed and had the smallest amount on their plates when the family sat down to eat, mothers wore aprons and slaved and mothers went to the confraternity on a Sunday evening and whispered things to each other about their wombs and their woes" (*MI* 66). O'Brien reveals the sacrificial role of mothers within the 1940s Irish society of her own youth, and it is evident that these real-life reflections are strongly echoed in her fiction. In fact, her observations in *Mother Ireland* are described in very similar terms in *A Pagan Place*, when the narrator mentions how her mother "gave herself the worst parts of the chicken, the skin, the Pope's nose, the posterior bits" (*PP* 15).

In O'Brien's novels and stories it is the mother who performs the bulk of the domestic and farm chores, with some help from a farmhand who is relied upon heavily to compensate for the lack of assistance from her often absent and intoxicated husband. Anne O'Dowd, in her discussion of women in early twentieth-century Ireland, reveals that rural women were expected to complete many physically challenging tasks on the farm on a daily basis: "In short, their work was arduous and back-breaking, involving, it is suggested, much more bending and stooping than their male co-workers in the field or on the shore" (209). In *The Country Girls*, O'Brien describes the physical and emotional toll of these many responsibilities upon Cait's mother:

Ah, that's life, some work and others spend," she said as she went off toward the yard with the bucket. ... Her right shoulder sloped more than her left from carrying

buckets. She was dragged down from heavy work, working to keep the place going, and at nighttime making lampshades and fire screens to make the house prettier. (CG 8)

Cait's mother must not only complete strenuous physical labour upon the farm but she also makes it her duty to beautify the house, further exemplifying the 1940s Irish ideology that a woman's proper place was within the private sphere of the home, creating an appealing "haven" for her loved ones. In O'Brien's short story "The Bachelor," when the mother finds wilted, rotting flowers in Jack "the bachelor's" house, she asks aloud, "what was a house without a woman" (*Returning* 73). This statement also points to the ways in which O'Brien's mother has internalized the dominant cultural message that a woman's role is in the home, tending to its maintenance and aesthetic beauty.

Significantly, her mothers are also fearful and antagonistic towards the written word in any form, as described in "The Bachelor": "Moreover she believed that books were sinful, that poetry was rubbish and that such things helped to turn people's minds and deflect them from their true work" (*RT* 66). This subtle inclusion evidently reflects upon O'Brien's own life as a young woman with ambitions to write, in that her fictional mothers, like her own mother, are unable to demonstrate an appreciation for the value of writing and literature, even if it is of interest to their daughters. Rebecca Pelan argues that "O'Brien's fictional mothers, though attracting our sympathy and pity, rarely attract our admiration, since it is they who are primarily responsible for programming their daughters into a narrow-minded world of subjugation and imprisonment" ("Love Objects" 63). As this chapter will further reveal, O'Brien's mothers can be viewed as indirectly perpetuating the inequality of rural Irish women since they promote the "virtues" of obedience, dependency, and domesticity to

their daughters and rarely encourage them to seek a different life or to strive to attain independence and self-confidence.

O'Brien's Mothers' Transgressive Sexuality

Interestingly, although her mothers appear to, and in many ways, actually do embody the nationalist and religious vision of ideal Irish motherhood, O'Brien adds an ironic layer to her mothers through their secret and often transgressive sexual lives. In both *A Pagan Place* and *Down by the River*, the mother figures have sexual encounters with the village doctors in their homes while their husbands are away. As the narrator describes in *A Pagan Place*:

The doctor and your mother sat on the kitchen table next to one another and her legs were down, and his hand was somewhere under her apron, in the unknown, tinkering, and she was not laughing and she was not crying but the sounds were like laughing and crying rolled into one, and she was flushed. You took the dog by its mane and ran off. (PP 43)

The mother's relationship with the doctor in *A Pagan Place* is described as being both sexual and emotional and is a reflection not only of her marital unhappiness, but also reveals her vulnerability in that she is, at least in part, being exploited by a man in a position of great authority in the community. At the same time, however, the mother derives a certain pleasure from these encounters, since she is able to experience a temporary yet thrilling sense of liberation and escape from her repressive everyday life. In *Down by the River*, Mary's poignant reflections about her mother reveal the many layers of her character hiding beneath the surface of her everyday identity as wife and mother:

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 that 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 the 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.

(DBTR 9)

This passage reveals the ultimate mystery of the mother, even or perhaps especially to her own daughter, since she represents many characters and symbols all at once, which makes her beautiful and fascinating yet also strange and even frightening to her child. Although O'Brien's young protagonists may not have a full understanding of their mothers' extra-marital sexual encounters, they do seem to fear them in these moments and realize that there are inconsistencies between their identities as mothers and wives and their hidden "other" lives wherein their desperation and unhappiness can no longer be suppressed. Thus, while O'Brien's mothers attempt and appear to be "ideal" Irish Catholic women, in reality, they struggle with their own forbidden sexual desires. O'Brien's depiction of her mothers' transgressive sexual behaviour in these novels reveals layers of ambiguity and complexity in her construction of the rural Irish mother. The mother is more than a static replica of the "perfect" Irish mother envisioned by the Church and State, but is, in fact, a real woman who has sexual desires, contradictory emotions, moral imperfections and even covert rebellions against the limited options for Irish women in unhappy, abusive marriages.

Smothering Mothering

O'Brien's mothers are overbearing and even smothering in their anxious affection for their daughters, perhaps as a subconscious means of possessing a sense of control within their otherwise unstable home lives. She conveys the intensity of this maternal protection through seemingly minor yet telling details within her fiction. For example, in the opening pages of *The Country Girls*, Cait's mother, who remains significantly unnamed, endures a sleepless night to watch over her daughter, explaining, "You had a sweet in your mouth and I was afraid you'd choke if you swallowed it whole, so I stayed awake just in case" (CG 8). O'Brien's mothers even sleep in the same beds as their daughters in most of these stories, rather than with their husbands. As the narrator in *A Pagan Place* describes, "When you turned to the wall she turned too, put her arm around you, underneath your ribs, clenched you once or twice" (PP 34). Admittedly, the mother's choice to sleep with her daughter is not only so that she can keep her daughter physically and emotionally close, but also stems from her desire to avoid sharing a marital bed with her husband and, therefore, the chance of further pregnancies. Nonetheless, these descriptions of extreme maternal anxiety further suggest how O'Brien's mothers may have interpreted the Catholic doctrine of the Virgin Mary as the ideal symbol of Irish motherhood, and used it as a justification for over-protecting their daughters.

Significantly, *Down by the River* strongly contrasts with O'Brien's earlier depictions of an intense mother-daughter bond through its virtual lack of description of closeness between Mary and her mother. For example, when Mary hears her father yelling at her mother downstairs, her mother lies to her daughter and explains that her father was only telling her a joke which she was laughing at: "Her mother went on laughing. A strange hard brittle

laughter. She did not like her mother then” (*DBTR* 9). This lack of emotional connection between mother and daughter, and the resentment that Mary feels towards her mother serve to emphasize the isolation and despair of both their lives, since Mary and her mother cannot even provide comfort to one another and are instead divided by the overpowering abuse of the father/husband.

Ironically, however, while in some ways O’Brien’s mothers attempt to anxiously “smother” and overprotect their daughters, their homes are frequently characterized by instability, conflict, and emotional and physical abuse due to their husbands’ severe alcohol addictions and subsequent explosive tempers. While this unpredictable and often hostile environment is created by the father, it is also enabled by an Irish patriarchal society as a whole in that the mother in these works feels powerless to stop her husband’s behaviour and has few if any options to escape her circumstances. In “The Bachelor,” the narrator reflects from the vantage point of adulthood upon her false idealizations and beliefs as a child about her mother’s life:

Downstairs, in the kitchen we lit the lamp and her hair which was red-brown glinted as she proceeded to make sandwiches from the bacon left over from lunch. I thought then that when I grew up if I could be as fetching as my mother I would be certain to find happiness. For some reason I believed that the troubles of her life were an anomaly and never did it occur to me that some of her fatality had already grafted itself onto me and determined my disposition. (*RT* 66)

The narrator in this story naively believed as a child that if she could only possess her mother’s beauty she would find personal fulfillment as a woman, not realizing that the seeming fulfillment hides the painful reality of her mother’s life. However, in retrospect she

recognizes that her mother's circumstances were not unique or rare, but were, rather, indicative of the overall plight of many women of her time. The narrator of this story acknowledges that her mother's marital unhappiness and oppression have inevitably affected her own adult life. This "fatality" is passed on from mother to daughter in O'Brien's fiction through her young female protagonists' internalization of their unstable home environments.

"That Unbreakable Link between Mother and Daughter"

O'Brien's young heroines become obsessed by their father's drinking, their parents' tumultuous relationship and, especially by their mothers' well-being, so that they are catapulted into an inappropriate role where they are no longer children but are instead protectors and comforters of their despairing and fearful mothers at a too early age. In *The Country Girls*, Cait is not only aware of her own feelings of apprehension, but is also highly familiar with the signs of worry and distress within her mother during her father's frequent battles with alcohol: "Mama was sitting by the range, eating a piece of dry bread. Her blue eyes were small and sore. She was staring directly ahead at something only she could see, at fate and at the future" (8). Cait recognizes the small physical details in her mother which indicate not only her sleeplessness but also her hopelessness over their circumstances. Cait is seemingly in tune with the very thoughts running through her mother's head as she anxiously awaits and simultaneously fears her husband's return: "She was thinking. Thinking where was he? Would he come home in an ambulance, or a hackney car, hired in Belfast three days ago and not paid for? Would he stumble up the stone steps at the back door waving a bottle of whiskey? Would he shout, struggle, kill her, or apologize?" (CG 9) Experiencing these hardships together, Cait and her mother develop a bond that is almost claustrophobic in its intensity, through their mutual feelings of having only each other in the

world to rely upon. Cait recognizes the fundamental role that she plays in her mother's life as her sole means of emotional support and affection: "I went over and put my arms round her neck and kissed her. She was the best Mama in the world. I told her so, and she held me very close for a minute as if she would never let me go. I was everything in the world to her, everything" (CG 8).

Even as a young girl, Cait is able to sense the emotional imbalance and inherent dysfunction of their mother-daughter relationship. In fact, it could be argued that the mother's emotional dependence on Cait only serves to emphasize the instability of their circumstances, rather than instilling feelings of self-confidence in her daughter as the most significant adult role model in her life. O'Brien conveys the emotional co-dependence of mother and daughter even through her dramatic description of Cait leaving her mother for the day to go to school: "In her brown dress she looked sad; the farther I went, the sadder she looked. Like a sparrow in the snow, brown and anxious and lonesome. It was hard to think that she got married one sunny morning in a lace dress and a floppy buttercup hat, and that her eyes were moist with pleasure when now they were watery with tears" (CG 9). This parting for school, which typically would constitute an everyday positive interaction between a mother and daughter is distorted in *The Country Girls*. Instead of the young daughter feeling apprehensive about leaving the familiarity of home, Cait is the one who feels her mother cannot bear to be left alone and she worries about her mother's immense unhappiness. Furthermore, her mother unconsciously imposes a burden of guilt upon her daughter for leaving the house, rather than being the one to encourage her to go out into the world and experience intellectual and social development.

Offering an alternate perspective, feminist theorist Joan W. Scott believes that the mother-daughter relationship is one that inherently subverts patriarchy and is a significant bond that has been diminished in our post-Freudian Western society: “The dissolving of boundaries between mothers and daughters constitutes a reclaiming of a certain ‘lost territory,’ the pre-oedipal love of the mother, and it provides what Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva refer to as a nonphallic [and in the context of patriarchal symbolism, subversive] *jouissance*” (“Fantasy Echo” 299). Thus, while the lack of boundaries between O’Brien’s mother and daughter figures can be seen as dysfunctional and unnatural on a certain level, it might also be interpreted as being symbolic of a female-centred love and connection that are entirely outside the realm of men and patriarchy.

Significantly, in an interview, O’Brien echoed Scott’s thoughts on the profound bond between mother and daughter; however, she believes that a daughter’s “desire” for her mother can never be actualized, not even imaginatively: “If you want to know what I regard as the principal crux of female despair, it is this: in the Greek myth of Oedipus and in Freud’s exploration of it, the son’s desire for his mother is admitted; the infant daughter also desires her mother but it is unthinkable, either in myth, in fantasy, or in fact, that the desire can be consummated” (Roth 109-110). O’Brien believes that while there is a theoretical language to describe the concept of desire as it relates to the mother-son relationship, girls are denied the ability to articulate their sense of emotional longing for and physical attachment to their mothers. Through her interviews as well as her fiction, it is evident that O’Brien believes in the immense spiritual and physical power of the mother-daughter bond and in the reality of the inner turmoil that women feel in response to the fact that this bond is not adequately acknowledged, validated or supported in our patriarchal society.

O'Brien's belief in the sheer physicality of the maternal connection is poignantly underscored in *A Pagan Place*:

In your mother you were safe and that was the only time you couldn't get kidnapped and that was the nearest you ever were to another human being. Between you and your mother there was only a membrane, paper thin. Being near someone on the inside was not the same thing as being near them on the outside, even though the latter could involve hugging and kissing. Once you were one with her. She didn't like it. She told the woman with the hair like Mrs Simpson how she was sick and bilious all the time. (PP 33)

It is significant to note here the narrator's feelings of insecurity about the fact that her mother did not enjoy being physically connected to her daughter in pregnancy, even though it is a state to which the daughter seems to long to return. The narrator's secret longing to be "one" with her mother again and her feelings of sadness that her mother would be unlikely to reciprocate these feelings shed further light upon O'Brien's statement that "female despair" is rooted in a woman's inability to articulate her "desire" for her mother.

Separation, Betrayal, and Loss of the Mother

Given the immensity and complexity of the mother-daughter bond within her fiction, O'Brien's protagonists' experiences of betrayal, separation from, and/or loss of their mothers are depicted as being profoundly life-altering and traumatizing. However, despite the unforgettable pain of maternal separation, this physical and spiritual dislocation also offers O'Brien's protagonists an opportunity for independent growth away from the often stifling and incubatory nature of the mother-daughter bond which has held such power over their lives. Reflecting upon the themes of her work in terms of such maternal separation,

O'Brien remarks, "My work is concerned with *loss* as much as with love. Loss is every child's theme, because by necessity the child loses its mother and its bearings. And writers, however mature and wise and eminent, are children at heart. So my central theme is loss-- loss of love, loss of self, loss of God" (Guppy 38). O'Brien emphasizes her belief in the fundamental and unforgettable mark of childhood upon one's adult life and acknowledges the painful necessity of growing away from or losing one's mother along this journey from childhood to adulthood. In her novels and stories of Irish girlhood, this pivotal event takes place in contrasting yet equally powerful ways.

In both *The Country Girls* and *A Pagan Place*, O'Brien's mothers, conveying the lack of legal and social options for 1940s Irish women, decide that their only recourse against their husbands' abusive actions is to temporarily leave the house before their husbands' drunken return. In *A Pagan Place*, the mother goes to her sister's house "in order to teach [the] father a lesson" (PP 76); however, she gives no warning to her daughter, who only realizes her mother is gone upon returning home from school and being informed by a family friend that she will be tentatively living under her care. As the narrator describes, "The thing that you thought would never happen happened. She left" (PP 76), summarizing her feelings of betrayal and her sense that her mother has actively sought to punish not her husband, but her daughter, for her unhappiness. Significantly, the narrator fears, above all, that her mother will die and leave her, and she reveals that her grandmother once attempted to commit suicide due to her similarly unhappy circumstances: "You did not want her to die. Her own mother nearly took her own life once, went out to the hayshed with the carving knife, having bade goodbye to everyone like it was a proper bed scene. Her own father was a toper too. History repeating itself" (PP 35). This telling passage demonstrates how these

destructive gender roles can be passed down from one generation to the next, since her grandfather was also a “toper,” or a heavy drinker, and her grandmother was similarly unhappy, so that the narrator fears her mother will also attempt to escape their abusive home through suicide.

While the narrator’s fears in *A Pagan Place* are not realized, in *The Country Girls*, Cait’s worst nightmare becomes a reality with her mother’s tragic death. Like the mother in *A Pagan Place*, Cait’s mother also suddenly leaves the home in order to escape from her husband and Cait thinks, “It wasn’t like her. She had never left me before, never” (CG 29); however, while traveling across the river to her sister’s house, her mother drowns in a boating accident. The agony of being separated from her mother is made clear when Cait describes her intense feelings of loss upon hearing the news of her mother’s sudden death: “After that I heard nothing, because you hear nothing, or no one, when your whole body cries and cries for the thing that it has lost. Lost. Lost. And yet I could not believe that my mother was gone; and still I knew it was true, because I had a feeling of doom and every bit of me was frozen stiff” (CG 41). In this moment, Cait, who is only fourteen years old, realizes that her life will never be the same, as she has lost this most vital of connections between mother and daughter. As Cait reflects, marking the end of this comparatively “innocent” phase of her life, “It was the last day of childhood” (CG 45). Arguably, however, Cait has always been denied a true childhood, and the death of her mother merely accentuates this fact by revealing all of the adult burdens she is now forced to carry.

Undoubtedly, the most challenging hardship of all is that Cait must struggle alone with the increased anger and misery of her self-destructive father in the wake of his wife’s death, and, in particular, as will be further explored in Chapter Two, his violent attempts to control

her as she becomes a young woman. With her sudden death, Cait's mother leaves her emotionally and socially deficient, since she has very little knowledge of how to defend herself against the hardships of the world, and, in particular, from the rage of her own father. Tasmin Hargreaves further reflects upon Cait and her mother's mutual emotional dependency when she was alive and the consequences of this connection which are fully realized when her mother dies:

Even before this event, however, the gradual separation of the self from the mother, which has to occur in psychological and emotional maturation, has not taken place because of the mother's unwillingness to let Caithleen grow away from her emotionally. Because this psychological umbilical cord between mother and child leaves Caithleen weak and dependent, she is, upon her mother's death, stranded at an infantile emotional level and condemned to carry a painful sense of loss and need throughout her life. (291)

It is debatable whether, as Hargreaves suggests, Cait's severe emotional problems, further revealed in the later two volumes of *The Country Girls Trilogy*, are due primarily to the death of her mother and her own conditioned emotional "weakness," or whether they stem from her external circumstances in a patriarchal society where her attempts to be independent and self-sufficient seem to be thwarted at every turn. While Cait's psychological problems are most likely a result of both interior and exterior factors, it is certain that Cait's relationship with her mother and her grief over her sudden death affect her profoundly throughout *The Country Girls*, as she has now lost her most significant childhood companion, despite the many tensions within their relationship.

By contrast, in the memorable conclusion to *A Pagan Place*, the young narrator actively

seeks to separate herself from her mother by leaving to become a nun in a Belgian convent. From her own perspective, the narrator's parting from her childhood home is a justified and necessary reaction to her mother's refusal of protection when the father viciously beats the narrator with a belt to punish her for being sexually violated by a priest. The narrator describes, when her father first begins to shake her, "You ran behind her, begged her to shield you but she said you had made your adulterous bed and you could lie in it now" (*PP* 199). This violence, enacted by the father and condoned by the mother, causes the narrator in *A Pagan Place* to feel abandoned by her mother so that their relationship is severely damaged. As the narrator thinks to herself while helping her mother on the farm soon after this event, "You were not lacking in friendliness but it was not the same, there was the breach forevermore" (*PP* 209). As Grace Eckley describes, "Formerly the mother and daughter had collaborated in self-defense against the father's shiftlessness and drunken violence. In this incident the mother offers no protection, and, apparently for the first time in years, agrees with the father's course of action" (66). Thus, both mother and daughter are deeply wounded through this perceived mutual betrayal of trust and affection, and their separation through the narrator's parting for the convent is the final outcome.

Ironically, the narrator's choice to join the convent causes her mother to feel grief and shame, rather than pride, as she feels that her daughter's motivations are insincere, intentionally hurtful, and ultimately escapist. In her mother's eyes, the narrator's decision to leave is the greatest betrayal of all, made evident when the narrator describes how, upon hearing of her daughter's plans, her mother "said her heart was finally broken, in pulp, pulped" (*PP* 214). However, the reasons for her departure are more complex than her mother understands, since the young narrator has an overwhelming need to leave her past

behind and start anew in an entirely different environment. She has been traumatized after her sexual encounter by the priest, and, rather than accepting the label of “sinner” by the community for her “shameful” encounter with the priest, by announcing her intention to join the convent she describes how in the village, it “was as if you had already entered, so shy and respectful were they” (*PP* 213).

The final paragraph of *A Pagan Place* reveals the immensity of the mother’s despair over her daughter’s departure, in the final moments before the narrator sets out for the convent:

I will go now, was what you said, hoping that she would emerge from the house and say goodbye and have done with you, but since no such thing happened you went anyhow and the last thing you heard was a howl starting up, more ravenous than a dog’s, more piercing than a person’s, a howl that would go on for as long as her life did, and his, and yours. (*PP* 223)

Evidently, the mother is so overcome with grief that she refuses to say goodbye to her daughter. Hence, the last noise the narrator hears is her mother’s “howl” from inside the house, since from her mother’s perspective, the narrator’s choice to leave her mother, her home and her country cannot be undone or ever forgotten, no matter what her reasons may be.

In the short story “My Mother’s Mother,” the narrator similarly struggles with her conflicting desire to be both close to her mother and away from her so that she can long for her presence:

Sitting there I both wanted to be in our house and to be back in my grandmother’s missing my mother. It was as if I could taste my pain better away from her, the

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

(*RT* 40)

The narrator of this story recognizes her mother's imperfections and realizes that she can only imaginatively construct her mother as the perfect being she desires when she is away from her. Similar to the narrator in *A Pagan Place*, therefore, she knows that one day she will part from her mother permanently and that this will break her heart; however she seems to derive a twisted pleasure from the thought that it is ultimately the daughter who has emotional authority and power over the mother.

In *Down by the River*, Mary also loses her mother early in the novel to cancer. However, once again serving as a powerful contrast to O'Brien's earlier novels and stories of childhood, when Mary visits the undertaker to say goodbye to her mother's body, she feels detached from her mother and cannot bring herself to kiss her goodbye. Mary desires to ask her mother's permission to leave their abusive home, but ultimately, like her mother, she is reduced to silence: "She thought that maybe it was because she did not love her mother enough and that one can only ask favours of those whom one loves unquestionably" (*DBTR* 56). O'Brien reveals the consequences of Mary's victimization by her father in that she feels betrayed by her mother's silence even while she sympathizes with it, so that, even in the mother's death, the daughter cannot force herself to demonstrate any affection for her. Through this scene, O'Brien once again points to the deep division that is often created

between mothers and daughters due to male abuse and exploitation, in a patriarchal society which can offer them little comfort or support for their mutual pain.

In O'Brien's fiction, she portrays the dual nature of the complex relationship between mother and daughter, in that while there is frequent misunderstanding, dysfunction, and even resentment between them, both mother and daughter are, at the same time, emotionally united and dependent upon one another through the common hardships they experience within their homes. Moreover, while the pain and trauma of their unhappy circumstances initially push mother and daughter closer together in O'Brien's writing, it is also, inevitably, this same patriarchal oppression which finally divides them. This physical and emotional rupture comes about in *A Pagan Place* through a conscious choice on the part of the narrator to separate from her mother. By contrast, in *The Country Girls*, the overwhelming despair and helplessness that permeate her life cause the mother to lose hope and die in an attempt to escape her plight, while in *Down by the River*, the mother succumbs to a fatal illness that is both mental and physical. Ultimately, in all of these works, O'Brien's young female protagonists are left to cope without their mothers as they stand on the brink of womanhood.

Paving the Way for Mothers and Daughters in Irish Fiction:

In her 2007 book on twentieth-century Irish women writers, Heather Ingman remarks upon the relative lack of mother-daughter relationships portrayed within Irish fiction until the mid-twentieth century, and credits O'Brien as being one of the first Irish novelists to depict this bond in the 1960s. However, Ingman believes that until very recently, this relationship was most often "portrayed as one of mutual hostility and conflict" ("Reclaiming the Mother" 76). As she explains:

Positive mother-daughter stories came late to Irish fiction. The iconization of the mother-son relationship in both Irish Catholicism and Irish nationalism ensured that for a long time the mother-daughter story remained unwritten in Irish literature. ... Perhaps because of its negative portrayal in Irish women's fiction, the Irish mother-daughter story has been largely neglected by literary critics. ("Reclaiming the Mother" 75, 79)

It is true that O'Brien certainly does not shy away from expressing the emotional pain, misunderstanding, and disconnection that can exist between a mother and daughter. However, rather than simply being "negative" for their own sake, her mother-daughter stories are a testament to the time in which she grew up, in 1940s rural Ireland, when the limitations of women's lives within an oppressive patriarchal culture must have inevitably affected their relationships with their daughters in often traumatic ways. Therefore, O'Brien's depiction of Irish mothers and daughters within these female *Bildungsromanes* is highly significant, since she was one of the first writers to give a creative voice to this complex and powerful female bond, within an Irish literary canon where mothers and daughters had seldom been portrayed by novelists or discussed by academics.

In a recent interview, when asked about the theme of betrayal in her work, O'Brien reflected upon her strong belief in the influence of childhood upon the rest of one's life, ruminating in particular about the largely incomprehensible power of the mother-daughter relationship:

I believe that we are so influenced by our early life-- our religion, our history, our politics, the rain, the this, the that. I wanted to show how we do things

unconsciously governed by some power above us. It can be a parent, it can be Joseph Stalin, it can be whoever, it goes on and on. Mothers are different to their daughters than to their sons, and my mother was masterful at owning my life-- my body, my romantic encounters, my mother was always present, like Banquo's ghost. ... The only way I won out-- if I did win out, it's always debatable--was to continue to be a writer. ... I did continue to write against her wishes, and if there is a betrayal, and there may well be, that is the betrayal. (Flanagan)

While O'Brien believes, on some level, that the very act of her taking up her pen to write is, in a sense, betraying the wishes of her mother, she has been, nonetheless, passionately compelled to write despite her mother's disapproval. O'Brien's recent reflections thus bring this discussion of her mother figures full circle, reminding us of the complexities and traumas within her own relationship with her mother that have allowed her to bring this subject so vividly and powerfully to the page.

CHAPTER TWO:

The Painful Confrontation with the Patriarch: O'Brien's Father-Daughter Relationships

While Chapter One explored the emotionally dense mother-daughter relationship in O'Brien's fiction, this chapter will delve into her young female protagonists' equally complex relationships with their fathers. In the same way that O'Brien's mothers are crucial role models who, in some respects, condone or at least fail to prevent their daughters' continued subjugation in their Irish patriarchal society, O'Brien's fathers can be viewed as the first and arguably most damaging perpetrators of this patriarchal oppression, violence and abuse against their daughters. However, also like O'Brien's mother-daughter relationships, this father-daughter abuse is equally complex in that the father's abusive behaviour, like the mother's self-sacrificing, smothering nature, is to a considerable extent, socially condoned and conditioned within a mid-to-late twentieth-century Irish patriarchal society. This state of affairs makes their fathers' abuse an extremely powerful force for her young female protagonists to confront. This chapter will touch upon the ways in which O'Brien's often frightening portrayal of the father brings an element of horror to her novels. At the same time, O'Brien acknowledges her fictional fathers' underlying love for their daughters, their inner feelings of desperation, and their longing for forgiveness, despite their many flaws and the deep pain they evidently cause in their young daughters' lives. Thus, rather than simply demonizing the father and dealing with the issue of father-daughter abuse in black and white terms, she points to the larger societal problems which enable male violence towards women. Therefore, O'Brien's fathers are not portrayed as one-dimensional

villains but are also, in many ways, victims of a patriarchal culture in the same way as Irish women.

Forgiving the Fury of the Father

In a memorable interview with O'Brien in 1984, American novelist Philip Roth asked her, "Who is *the* unforgiven creature in your imagination?" (Roth 103). O'Brien's response to this personal question is revealing and intriguing in relation to the themes of her fiction:

Up to the time he died, which was a year ago, it was my father. But through death a metamorphosis happened within. Since he died I have written a play about him embodying all his traits-- his anger, his sexuality, his rapaciousness, et cetera-- and now I feel differently toward him. I do not want to relive my life with him or to be reincarnated as the same daughter, but I do forgive him. (Roth 103)

While she struggled to find common ground with her mother, O'Brien also had a complex and ambiguous relationship with her father. She reveals that she partially expresses her emotions about their relationship through her writing, so that she has finally been able to experience a sense of catharsis and forgiveness of his actions. O'Brien has elsewhere discussed the effect of her father's behaviour in her childhood upon her future relationships with men:

You see, my own father was what you might call the "archetypal" Irishman-- a gambler, drinker, a man totally unequipped to be a husband or a father. And of course that coloured my views, distorted them, and made me seek out demons. ... My experience was pretty extreme, so that it is hard for me to imagine harmony, or even affinity, between men and women. I would need to be reborn. (Plimpton 255)

These statements are highly significant since they further suggest how O'Brien's own relationship with her father and with men as a whole might be conveyed, at least on some level, through the themes of her writing. As touched upon in Chapter One, in each of the novels and stories under analysis, the father is a man who certainly seems to be "unequipped" to deal with the everyday responsibilities and stresses of marriage and children. Instead, he turns to gambling, alcohol, and an explosive, unpredictable anger in order to escape from reality and falsely convince himself that he is in control of his life and, by extension, the lives of his wife and children. O'Brien's admission that she is unable to envision true understanding between men and women due to her own painful relationship with her father sheds further light upon the dysfunction and disconnection inherent in her portrayal of male-female relationships, which will be touched upon in more detail in Chapter Three. As briefly discussed in the preceding chapter on mothers, O'Brien has a strong belief in the unforgettable mark left by one's parents upon one's future life and relationships, a perspective that she has shared in many interviews throughout her career: "We know that the effect of our parents is indelible, because we internalize as a child and it remains inside us forever. Even when the parents die, you dream of them as if they were still there" (O'Brien to Plimpton 256). O'Brien's poignant statements in interviews about her often difficult memories of childhood reveal the emotional depth and authenticity of her writing on the father-daughter relationship. Her writing takes on further significance and multiple layers of meaning with this insight into her past, since the reader becomes aware that her discussion of this bond is based upon firsthand, lived experience and is drawn from genuine emotions felt in her own youth.

Anxiety and Trauma: The Impact on Childhood Identity

Arguably, the father is one of the most memorable and disturbing characters in O'Brien's fiction and is one of the most powerful symbols of patriarchal oppression in her young female characters' lives. The father's attempt to control his female family members is especially apparent in these novels and stories of childhood. In his relationships with both his wife and daughter(s), the father resorts to violence, temporary abandonment of the family, alcohol, verbal and emotional abuse, and his culturally ordained authority as the "man of the house" in order to grasp desperately at this feeling of control. In each of these works, the father's unhealthy desire to have power over his daughter's life and, in particular, her body, is oftentimes harmful to her physical self, as well as being psychologically damaging.

The constant, underlying threat of danger created by the fathers' drinking and abuse permeates the childhood homes of O'Brien's protagonists and is the central destructive force affecting their personalities and emotional development. These young adolescent characters are highly sensitive and intuitive and thus are all too aware of the tensions and misery within their homes. O'Brien's protagonists absorb and observe information within their environments very intensely and acutely, although their parents fail to recognize how deeply their daughters internalize their unhappy realities. In *The Country Girls*, Cait's overwhelming anxiety as a young girl is revealed within O'Brien's very first published sentence of fiction: "I wakened quickly and sat up in bed abruptly. It is only when I am anxious that I waken easily and for a minute I did not know why my heart was beating faster than usual. Then I remembered. The old reason. He had not come home" (CG 5). These sentences introduce the reader to Cait, O'Brien's first and most critically-discussed female

protagonist, and to the recurring theme in her fiction of the traumatic psychological effects of a highly dysfunctional family upon an adolescent girl. The fact that Cait's symptoms of anxiety are present even before she is fully conscious from sleep reveals the profound impact of her father's frequent absences from the home upon her sense of psychological security and well-being. It is as though she has been denied safety even within the realm of her unconscious, causing her sleep to be disturbed by the events of her waking life.

Similarly, in *A Pagan Place*, the narrator's emotional distress after witnessing her father's violent threats towards her mother also manifests itself physically:

One day your father had a pitchfork raised to your mother and said I'll split the head of you open and your mother said And when you've done it there will be a place for you. And you were sure that he would and you and your sister Emma were onlookers and your sister Emma kept putting twists of paper in her hair, both to curl it and to pass the time. Later when your mother felt your pulse she said it was not normal, nobody's pulse was normal that particular day. (*PP* 24)

The narrator silently and helplessly watches her parents in yet another conflict over their dire financial situation that quickly escalates into name-calling, yelling, and threats of violence. The most brutally graphic and tragic example of the after-effects of this childhood abuse is depicted in *Down by the River*, when, after she is secretly forced to have oral sex with her father, Mary goes into a state of shock and is so traumatized she cannot speak to her alarmed mother or to the doctor: "They felt her pulse. ...She was asked if she wanted something, if she wanted biscuits. She would not speak. Nothing would drag a word out of her, not threats, not coaxing, not their kneeling down and whispering. Her tongue was gone" (*DBTR* 29). Significantly, in all three novels O'Brien expresses her protagonists' feelings of

fear and anguish within their childhood homes through their unsteady heartbeats, as fitting reflections of their emotional dis-ease.

In “The Bachelor,” the narrator’s constant feelings of worry over her father’s wavering state of sobriety are also made apparent: “I thought I smelt whiskey and then put the thought aside as just being fear, imaginary fear, but Mama thought it too, and that night in bed we both prayed and cried hoping that he would not go on a batter” (*RT* 69). Evidently, O’Brien’s young narrator in this story is continually on alert for the most subtle signs that her father is about to lose control through his drinking and leave the family once again. She no longer trusts her own judgments of reality, but rather, attempts to deny her observations by convincing herself that the scent upon her father’s breath is only a figment of her imagination. Tragically, all four heroines in these works are forced to live in a state of constant fear and anxiety due to the abuse, conflict, and pain they witness and experience all too frequently.

Cathy Caruth, who explores the experience of trauma in twentieth-century history, psychology and literature, argues that trauma comes about when the mind is unable to heal from a damaging experience in the same way as the body: “If a life threat to the body and the survival of this threat are experienced as a direct infliction and the healing of a wound, trauma is suffered in the psyche precisely, it would seem, because it is not directly available to experience” (61). Thus, even in the moments when they are not in any direct physical danger, O’Brien’s protagonists continue to feel psychologically threatened due to their unresolved memories of past traumatic and violent experiences, from which their minds are unable to fully recover.

The Terror of the Tyrannical Father

As this chapter has revealed, the father poses a looming, ever-present threat, since his drunken outbursts can be neither predicted nor controlled by his wife and daughter(s), but are always lurking just under the surface of his typically sullen, controlling and irritable private demeanor. Significantly, as this chapter will later reveal, the father's alcoholism, anger and abusive nature exist in stark contrast with his capacity to be a hospitable, engaging, and even jovial man amongst visitors and members of the community, thus making his frequent private outbursts all the more frightening to his daughter, who cannot understand her father's split personality or predict when "Mr. Hyde" will suddenly emerge.

O'Brien's *Down by the River*, *The Country Girls* and *A Pagan Place* all evoke haunting images of entrapment, oppression and abuse of the daughter by her father. In particular, *The Country Girls* and *Down by the River* convey strikingly parallel scenes which are seemingly echoes of one another, in which the daughter intensely fears her father's drunken return to the home. She is trapped in this dangerous environment and, moreover, feels unable to escape from his brutal wrath and violence.

While temporarily staying at the homes of their school friends, Cait from *The Country Girls* and *Down by the River*'s Mary both place themselves in extremely vulnerable positions by returning to their farmhouses to collect their possessions while the mother is absent and the father's whereabouts are unknown. Although both protagonists initially express strong apprehensions about entering their homes under these circumstances, they are each coaxed by their young friends, Baba and Tara, who do not comprehend the gravity of the abuse and chaos awaiting them inside. As Cait fearfully enters her house with Baba, her "teeth were chattering" (CG 30) and her "knees were shaking uncontrollably" (CG 31),

revealing the height of her anxiety at the possibility of confronting her father unexpectedly. Similarly, Mary tries to express her fears to Tara, pleading with her, “I can’t ... My father would go mad. ... He’ll follow me upstairs” (*DBTR* 79); however, in the end she is at a loss for words to describe her father’s unspeakable sexual abuse and forces herself to enter her house alone to retrieve her mother’s dress for the disco both girls plan to attend.

O’Brien creates a gripping feeling of terror and suspense in these scenes through her young protagonists’ mounting apprehensions and fears of the dangers lurking within the enclosed space of their homes. The reader is instinctually made aware through O’Brien’s foreboding literary tone that her protagonists will not escape unscathed but will inevitably find themselves face-to-face with their worst nightmares: their drunken, angry and desperate fathers. For example, in *Down by the River* when Mary cautiously enters her momentarily empty house, O’Brien foreshadows the scene of violence to come by conveying a haunting scene revealing her father’s destruction of her personal possessions and invasion of her privacy:

She got a fright when she went into her own room. There were clothes of hers all over the floor as if her father had been looking through her things, looking for her diary maybe. Also the head of the Sacred Heart had come off. The fallen head with its chalky root lay beside the body that was blood-spattered: the very red life-like heart looked pained. (*DBTR* 81)

The scattered clothes and broken religious sculpture symbolize the chaos and violence that have overtaken Mary’s life, so that even her sacred belongings and private space have been violated without her consent. Further emphasizing the horrific and even Gothic undertones of this scene are the images of Christ’s “blood-spattered” body, broken in two by the

father's violent overturning of her room, and the "life-like," "pained" heart, evoking the sense of a supernatural, divine presence that seems to empathize with Mary's plight.

In both novels, the father appears within the house unexpectedly, catching his daughter in an unguarded moment so that there is no escape. In *Down by the River*, Mary's father's strange, theatrical mannerisms upon seeing her in the house alert her to the fact that she is in a threatening situation: "Her father seems to materialize as from nowhere, like a fork of fire and so heartened is he to see that she has come home he salutes her as he would a special visitor" (*DBTR* 82). O'Brien subtly reminds the reader of the father's dual personality, and emphasizes the twisted, chilling fact that Mary's father, James, is only addressing her warmly and in the dramatic tone he usually reserves for houseguests because he is intoxicated and is about to exploit her body and mind. Furthermore, O'Brien conveys the depth of James's psychological disease when she describes how he "allows himself now to advance into a charade that she is not she, she is a stranger in her black dress and her little beaded evening purse" (*DBTR* 83). Thus, under the deluded pretense that he is having sexual intercourse with a woman other than his daughter, O'Brien describes James' horrific sexual abuse of Mary, during which she can do nothing but silently repeat to herself that it will soon be over: "The hard spring of the chaise like a plank, then a spume of murmurs, maudlin, breathy, her dress and things gone and decrazing herself by thinking that in a given number of minutes it would be over. How many minutes she could not tell" (*DBTR* 84). O'Brien emphasizes Mary's complete loss of personal agency in this highly disturbing and graphic scene, which is but one of several instances within the novel wherein Mary is brutally sexually assaulted by her father. While Tara waits for her outside, oblivious to the tragedy occurring within and the reason why she is unable to come out to go to the disco,

Mary is essentially used as an object by her father and then left dehumanized and defenseless, lying facedown on the floor, “Her mind cold. Like a little skull. And like a skull, empty of everything” (*DBTR* 85).

In the parallel scene of father-daughter abuse in *The Country Girls*, written by O’Brien almost thirty years earlier, Cait is similarly confronted by her father who also appears in the house “as from nowhere” (*DBTR* 82). As Cait describes, “I stopped dead in the kitchen doorway, because there he was. There was my father, drunk, his hat pushed far back on his head and his white raincoat open. His face was red and fierce and angry. I knew that he would have to strike someone” (*CG* 32). Cait’s father is furious that his wife has asserted her rights and expressed her marital unhappiness by leaving the home to stay with her sister across the river, where he cannot reach her. Therefore, in his wife’s absence, he projects his anger over this perceived loss of control onto his daughter, by giving her a “punch under the chin” (*CG* 33) and snarling menacingly, “Always avoiding me. Always avoiding your father. You little s---. Where’s your mother or I’ll kick the pants off you” (*CG* 33). Cait’s father is enraged that his wife and daughter have seemingly plotted against him, leaving him feeling powerless and rejected and causing him to lash out at Cait. Fortunately, preventing this physical and verbal abuse from escalating further, Cait uses her father’s desire to be viewed as a “gentleman” by others to her own advantage, by calling to Baba to come downstairs to greet her father so that “he took his hands off me at once. He didn’t want people to think he was brutal” (*CG* 33). Although her father tries to insist, “She’ll stay and look after me. That’s what she’ll do” (*CG* 33), Cait is rescued by Baba, who assertively responds that “Caithleen is to stay with us” (*CG* 33), and the girls quickly escape to Baba’s house together before her father’s violent rage can intensify. Thus, Cait, having a witness to

the crime, is spared from further physical violence, while Mary, all alone, is forced to succumb to horrendous sexual abuse, emphasizing O'Brien's fathers' warped mentality that it is seemingly more important to protect their reputations rather than their daughters.

A Pagan Place depicts an equally horrifying scene of physical abuse of the narrator by her father, when her parents hear rumours in the village that she has had a sexual encounter with the new priest. Without even giving her a chance to explain that she was emotionally manipulated and sexually violated, her father begins to strike her partially naked body viciously and repeatedly with her own school ruler to punish her for her "sins." O'Brien's description of the young narrator's futile attempt to escape from her pursuing, violent father once again conveys the disturbing feeling of horror often present in her portrayal of the father-daughter dynamic:

You ran into the hall and he followed, his boot in the divide of your bottom. You ran up the stairs to the first room. Your intention was to get in there and close the door and stay there indefinitely, the way people did in walled cities during a siege. He flung it open and ordering you on to the iron bed, he raised your clothes so that they were bunched over the top half of your body, nearly engulfing you. ... The slap resounded all over the house. (*PP* 199)

O'Brien's narrator tries desperately to escape from her father, who acts as an oppressive tyrant with the unstoppable intent of harming her and, in particular, of controlling her body and her sexuality. Through these scenes, O'Brien paints a picture of the rural Irish home as a dangerous and threatening space for her female narrators, particularly in the absence of their mothers. In this way, she effectively employs elements of horror and suspense in order to convey the palpable feeling of terror felt by her young protagonists in response to their

fathers' emotional, physical, and/or sexual abuse.

Shades of Gray: The Father's Capacity for Comedy and Compassion

While under the potent influence of alcohol and their own uncontrollable tempers, O'Brien's fathers evidently embody several traits of a violent, dominating, patriarchal tyrant. However, her fathers certainly are not one-dimensional and cannot be adequately described simply as villains. Instead, her fathers are complex and ultimately pitiable, since their flaws end up isolating and alienating them from their loved ones.

O'Brien's portrayal of the volatile Irish father is certainly not unfamiliar to Irish literature. In his discussion of twentieth-century Irish memoirs of childhood, in which he explores the work of writers such as John McGahern, Frank McCourt, and Nuala O'Faolain, Diarmaid Ferriter explains:

A majority of fathers emerge from the published memoirs of childhood as utterly unlikeable, disreputable, drunken, and incapable of communication. ... The ability and the determination of fathers to control the temperature of the domestic environment is a consistent feature of these memoirs of childhood, as is the degree to which they blamed others. (81, 82)

Evidently, these literary depictions of the father by her Irish contemporaries are similar in many ways to O'Brien's own characterization of the father. Significantly, Ferriter reveals the complexity of many of these Irish portrayals of the father, using the example of Frank McCourt's likening of his father in *Angela's Ashes* to the Holy Trinity. As Ferriter remarks, the father in *Angela's Ashes* is seemingly made up of three different people--"the avid newspaper reader and Republican who lapped up politics past and present; the great

storyteller who thrived on entertaining his children; and the feckless drunk who drank the money sent for a newborn baby” (Ferriter 82).

This sense of the father’s split personality is found in O’Brien’s fiction as well, since, when the father is sober and calm, he is capable of being quite comedic and even affectionate with his family. This more sympathetic aspect of the father’s character is described most vividly in *A Pagan Place*, wherein the father’s lighthearted and comedic traits are revealed through his songs and theatrical stories. One example of the father’s affection for his daughter is his obvious joy at the news of her birth: “When you were born he and his brother were at issues but upon hearing the good news they burst into song, sang *Red River Valley* through the nose and fell in over the bed trying to get a gawk at you” (*PP* 32). As a small yet significant gesture of love, the father sets aside his disagreement with his brother and breaks into song at the moment of his daughter’s birth. Furthermore, there are various scenes throughout the novel in which the father is telling comedic and exaggerated tales of adventure from his own youth, much to the amusement of those around him. O’Brien describes that his wife and their neighbour, Hilda, “said he was a scream, said he ought to be on stage” (*PP* 73), emphasizing his quick wit and his desire to entertain his family and guests when he is in a jovial mood.

In one particularly humorous scene from *A Pagan Place*, the narrator and her parents come across a peeled banana lying in a field, which O’Brien explains was a phenomenon for the time since foreign produce rarely made its way into Ireland, particularly during the years of World War II in which the novel is set (*PP* 58). Together, they debate the various ways that it could have materialized, and finally decide that some unwitting individual must have found this rare banana but, being perplexed as to how to consume it, took the banana skin

instead, causing great laughter between the narrator and her parents. O'Brien explains how "the three of you linked, with you in the middle. The sky and the earth had no division and it was like walking towards heaven, with your mother and father and you linked and laughing" (*PP* 58-59). This moment of happiness is perhaps the most joyous scene of the novel, since the narrator is overcome with the feeling of being protected and loved by her parents, so that she is suddenly free to be a carefree and innocent child, and can momentarily forget all of the pain she has both witnessed and personally endured in her young life. On the other hand, through this moment of familial harmony, the daughter is offered a fleeting glimpse of what her family could have been, were it not for her father's tragic alcohol addiction, which adds a bittersweet tone to this otherwise "heavenly" scene between the narrator and her parents.

Just as she does in *A Pagan Place*, in *Down by the River*, O'Brien demonstrates the father's ability to show compassion: however, in this case, it is directed towards his animals rather than towards his daughter. Despite the heinous sexual crimes he commits against his daughter, Ann Norton argues that Mary's father's humanity is conveyed by O'Brien, through the affection that he shows for his horses and the way that he tenderly saves the life of a mare giving birth to her foal (*DBTR* 62). In this moment, Norton believes that Mary "sees, in a crucial epiphany, that her father is good as well as evil, that he has the capacity for love even as he manifests its opposite" (Norton 91). These sentiments are similarly expressed by Sophia Hillan, who remarks upon O'Brien's sensitive portrayal of the father, James, throughout this novel:

O'Brien treats this with great delicacy. James is not portrayed as a monster. She is deeply compassionate towards him, while sparing us none of the horror of his actions. We know he rapes his daughter brutally, time and again; we know he

terrifies her and almost destroys her emotionally and mentally; we know he has been equally cruel toward his wife. Yet, we also see his moments of kindness, his near-tenderness, and his profound despair. (151)

In this scene with his animals, the father's capacity for affection and the more sensitive and gentle side of his nature are depicted by O'Brien. However, it could also be argued that this moment leaves the reader with a feeling of bitterness for the love Mary has been denied, particularly when Mary observes that her father demonstrates a sense of affection to this birthing horse that he had "never shown her or her mother or possibly anyone" (*DBTR* 63).

This sense of loss that Mary feels is portrayed in a chapter that poignantly contrasts with the joyous moment previously discussed from *A Pagan Place*, in which the narrator walks linked with her parents in nature. Instead, in this scene in *Down by the River*, nature reminds Mary of the death of a childhood dream, rather than being associated with freedom and contentment as in *A Pagan Place*. In *Down by the River*, Mary momentarily returns to her father's house with Cathal, the solicitor defending her abortion case; however, she refuses to go inside because she cannot bear to see her father, and instead, waits outside in the front garden. She realizes that the images of her house and yard now frighten her, though this was once a place where she played and dreamed as a child:

She was looking at the two trees, the selfsame trees that she had often seen from the bedroom window, the chestnut to one side and the ash tree to the other. 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. (*DBTR* 216)

Mary remembers a time as a child when she associated the trees in her yard with her parents and imagined that she was embracing them both and bringing them closer together. This poignant image symbolizes her childhood longing to be loved and to bask in the love between her parents, a longing doomed to go, for the most part, unfulfilled.

While the father in *Down by the River* shares many characteristics with the fathers in *The Country Girls*, *A Pagan Place*, and *Returning*, he is, arguably, etched most strongly upon the reader's mind due to O'Brien's graphic portrayal of his dark and harrowing abuse. At the same time, he is also particularly memorable because of the skillful rendering of the many grey areas of his character, so that he cannot be viewed as simply "evil." Instead, the reader is led to recognize his capacity for goodness, and, as this next section shall explore, O'Brien points to the psychological illness and despair at the root of the father's abuse of the daughter in all of these works.

Exploring the Guilt, Despair and Vulnerability of the Father

Due to his seeming inability to end his own extremely harmful actions, the father can be seen as the central source and symbol of tragedy in O'Brien's female protagonists' lives. O'Brien poignantly portrays the cruelty of the father's angry and selfish behaviour and contrasts these terrible scenes with rare moments revealing his capacity for affection, compassion and humour. Perhaps most significantly, she conveys the father's despair when he recognizes that he is caught in a destructive cycle from which he cannot escape and is therefore doomed to repeat. In his sporadic periods of sobriety, the father's guilt over his emotional neglect and failure to protect his family as the "patriarch" is made evident. In *The Country Girls*, after the death of his wife, this guilt manifests itself through the father's stubborn yet clearly despairing insistence that he has been an attentive father and husband:

There were tears on his cheek and he snuffled a bit. ... "I never deprived you of anything, nor your mother either. Now did I?"

"No."

"Ye had only to mention a thing and ye got it." I said that was true and went downstairs immediately to fry him a rasher and make a cup of tea. (CG 56)

Rather than blaming her father for the sorrows of her young life, Cait sees her father's obvious suffering and grief and cannot bring herself to be truthful about his shortcomings. Ironically, rather than the father consoling and attending to his daughter following the mother's death, it is the daughter who is in the role of consoler. In this moment, Cait acts the reassuring parent, and her father has become the anxious child. This parent-child role reversal is evidently a recurring pattern in O'Brien's fiction, since, as described in Chapter One, the daughter is often placed in the role of comforter and protector of her mother during her father's bouts with alcohol. In this scene, the daughter is once again forced to assume the role of the parent, this time to her father, revealing the absence of consistently reliable, emotionally stable parental figures in O'Brien's fiction.

"The Bachelor" depicts a scene in which the father tries to connect with his daughter through his horses, like the father in *Down by the River*. In this story, the father asks the narrator to help him count his horses on the farm, as a means of making amends for his recent violent outburst in which he waves a gun around the living room while the narrator hides outside of the house in fear (RT 70). Comparing the temperament of the horses to her father, the narrator thinks, "I feared them as much as I feared him because they too stood for unpredictability and massive jerky strength" (RT 71-72). While they feed the horses, the

father of this story essentially repeats the guilt-ridden statements of the father in *The Country Girls*, desperately defending himself as a husband and father:

“I’m a good father, good to you and your mother.”

“You’re not,” I thought, but did not speak.

“Answer me,” he said.

“Yes,” I said grudgingly. (RT 72)

Like Cait in *The Country Girls*, the narrator of “The Bachelor” attempts to appease her father rather than argue with him about his parenting, since she realizes that this would be futile and lead to further conflict. Once again, the father’s insistence that he has been “good” to his family and his aggressive prompting of his daughter to agree, suggests his inner fears that he has, in fact, let his wife and children down, though he does not or cannot admit to this truth.

Finally, in the most gripping scene in which the father’s guilt is revealed, in *Down by the River*, James breaks down and reveals to the solicitor that he is guilty of sexually abusing his daughter, not just through his telling words but through his terrified facial expression: “‘I might have kissed her...The odd time...A father does.’ The eyes wide open now, the bluish whites aghast and empty of every dreg of hope, wishing that someone, most likely himself, would take a razor to them, leaving only the blind untelling sockets” (DBTR 229). O’Brien makes a powerful intertextual connection by invoking the well-known scene from the Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex*, in which Oedipus gouges out his eyes in order to punish and mutilate himself, upon discovering that he has had sexual relations with his mother. James knows that he is unable to deny to the lawyer and to himself that he is guilty of these despicable actions. Furthermore, he is aware that his daughter wants nothing more to do

with him, which, as O'Brien describes, "of all the wrenchings of his life it is the worst" (DBTR 219). With these realizations, his despair overpowers him, causing him to commit suicide. Tragically and ironically, James ends his life by hanging himself on a tree outside their house, likely one of the very same trees that, as previously discussed, his daughter once enjoyed imagining was her father and dreamed of embracing as a symbol of her love for him. Through this graphic scene of violence, the depth of his shame and self-loathing is made visible, if only to the silent natural world around him. As O'Brien writes: "For witness, the frost-flecked house in a glittering dilapidation, fallen chimney pots and the winter pampases swaying in a soft and murmurous sibilance. Quiet things to mark a violent passing" (DBTR 249). She effectively conveys the depths of his despair so that the reader is moved to sympathize with James' horrible plight: "No more. Free of their words and their crass advice. Plead guilty. Plead insane. When did it start. Why did it start. His blood to be dispatched to Oxford to undergo a test. Why did it start. Why did it start. Who in the wide world could answer that for him which he himself did not know" (DBTR 249). The father cannot comprehend why he brutally abused and impregnated his daughter, emphasizing the crippling mental disease that consumes his mind and his body, causing him to lose his grip on reason and reality. While an awareness of the father's many inner demons certainly does not justify his actions, O'Brien does attempt to offer compassion to the father by exposing his desperate and diseased state of mind throughout this novel.

Learning to "get inside the skin of a man:" O'Brien's Male Characterizations

According to several critics, O'Brien's depiction of the father in *Down by the River* is significantly more complex and in-depth than her earlier portrayals of this character. This argument does hold weight when considering the father in, for example, *The Country Girls*,

who is significantly less accessible and far less sympathetic to the reader since his inner struggles and feelings are not brought into such sharp focus by O'Brien. This contrast is most likely why recent critics have brought considerable attention to the father in *Down by the River* as one of O'Brien's most memorable and well-constructed male characters to date. In an interview in 1995, prior to writing *Down by the River*, O'Brien acknowledged the difficulties she believes she has had in constructing well-rounded male characters and, especially, in featuring a man as the central figure in her novels:

Very difficult for me, in fact, maybe impossible. It's a limitation and I regret it, but I don't think I could. And it's not that I don't like men, because I do actually, I really do. But I don't think I can get inside the skin of a man the way sometimes I can get inside the skin of a woman. It's a different way of thinking and being, it's a different quotidian of emotion. Along with not being able to, I would also fear I'm not able to, so I wouldn't have a sure touch. And sureness of touch is what counts in a work. ... I wouldn't have that in making a man centre stage. The men are always there but the internal journey is a woman's journey. (Swaim)

It is certainly true that O'Brien seems most comfortable exploring the "woman's journey" in her fiction and that she will most likely continue to portray women's lives at the core of her novels. In a more recent interview in 2003, she admitted, "I may have been more ill at ease when writing about men in my early novels"; however, revealing her burgeoning confidence in her male characters, she added that her more recent male protagonists are undoubtedly "realized" characters with enough depth to be adapted to the screen or to the stage (Thompson 202). Thus, as this chapter has explored, O'Brien's treatment of the father in her fiction has gradually become more nuanced and complex, so that her fathers are not

portrayed simply as unfeeling villains, but are exposed as ultimately human through their evident feelings of vulnerability and shame over the pain and trauma they inflict upon their families.

O'Brien's Fathers: Victims of their Upbringing?

Through her portrayal of father-daughter abuse, O'Brien brings a significant sensitivity and poignancy to the issue of male violence against women as a whole. She conveys the serious problems her fathers struggle with, such as alcoholism, mental illness, poverty, grief, and violent anger, in a twentieth-century rural Irish culture where these issues were often deeply suppressed and hidden by both men and women in order to uphold the family's reputation in the community. Shedding further light upon these complex issues, Heather Ingman connects O'Brien's themes of familial dysfunction and parental abuse in *The Country Girls* to de Valera's 1937 constitution and his restrictive definition of the ideal Irish family in post-Independence Ireland:

In her first published work, *The Country Girls* (1960), [O'Brien] undermines the idealisation of the family unit on which de Valera's Constitution is founded.

Caithleen Brady and her mother live in fear of violence and abuse from the alcoholic and feckless Mr. Brady, but since the family unit is inviolate the abuse cannot be publicly acknowledged. Mr. Brady is thought of in the neighbourhood as "a gentleman, a decent man who wouldn't hurt a fly" [O'Brien, *CG* 15] ("Stretching Boundaries" 255).

Thus, O'Brien's portrayal of the abusive father confirms the prevailing norm with respect to the Irish family in the mid-twentieth century. As Ingman argues in her article, the newly-formed Irish State seemingly placed a higher value on promoting this idealized vision of the

Irish family than on acknowledging, exposing, and attempting to resolve the deep-seated problems and abuse taking place within many homes in 1940s Ireland (“Stretching Boundaries” 255).

Furthermore, O’Brien skillfully suggests how, like their daughters, her fathers are also, to an extent, victims of their own upbringing and culture, since their Irish Catholic societies do not want to admit or confront the social problems which are inevitably rooted in the confining gender roles of the family. This sense of secret personal shame and public denial is depicted even in *Down by the River*, set in the early 1990s, when the father acknowledges to the solicitor questioning him that he has long been aware of his own mental and emotional problems: “I’m a luckless man, always was...Before I married...After I married...Never stood a chance...After my wife died I asked them to send me somewhere...An infirmary...Anywhere...But they wouldn’t” (*DBTR* 219). James insists that he requested to be removed from his home after his wife’s death, because he was aware of his own highly disturbed mental state and knew that his sexual abuse of his daughter would only worsen after her mother’s death. He claims, at least, that he would have gone to an “infirmary” in order to spare his daughter from further harm; however, “they,” the Irish authorities, refused to listen to his pleas, leaving his daughter at his mercy. Of course, it is significant to keep in mind that James’s admission of his own mental instability takes place only after the many horrendous abusive acts he commits towards his daughter have been discovered, and the novel is ambiguous as to how much of James’s testimony the reader should trust. However, if there is any truth to James’s statements, it could be that from a broader cultural perspective, his long-term abuse of his daughter may have been so deeply hidden and denied due to deeply-entrenched cultural notions about the “ideal” Irish family

as outlined by de Valera. In other words, if Mary's parents were expected to uphold Catholic and Nationalist ideals, such as self-sacrificing femininity/motherhood, authoritative, unemotional masculinity/fatherhood, as well as a belief in the immense importance of promoting a "respectable" image of the family at all times, then this may have contributed to the fact that the abuse was not brought to light much sooner (by neither the parents nor the community).

Since the father's problems are far from being resolved within O'Brien's fiction, the daughter is left with few options other than to remove herself from the threatening space of her home and attempt to embark upon a new and independent life of her own. As shall be explored in Chapter Three, outside the familiarity of their homes, O'Brien's protagonists are faced with new and often equally daunting challenges as they become young women, and they carry with them many difficult memories of their past which necessarily influence their future experiences with both men and women. As the narrator of "The Bachelor" ultimately realizes, "Only one thing was uppermost in me and that was flight, and in my fancies I had no idea that no matter how distant the flight or how high I soared those people were entangled in me" (*RT* 79).

Reflecting upon her childhood from the vantage point of adulthood, the narrator of this story admits that although as an adolescent she desperately longed to be free from her past, she now knows that she can never truly escape from her childhood, and in particular, from the most influential figures in her young life-- her parents. She realizes that they are and always will be a crucial part of who she is, since they have left "indelible" imprints upon her mind and her character. The narrator's thoughts shed light upon O'Brien and her writing, since she, too, continues to be influenced and inspired in her fiction by the intensely

powerful yet often painful parent-child bond. Significantly, O'Brien's female protagonists' desires to leave their childhood homes behind parallel O'Brien's own difficult decision to leave not only her village but also her nation, in order to find elsewhere her true identity and her calling as a writer.

CHAPTER THREE:

The Irish Female Body under Siege: The Punishment of Female Sexuality in O'Brien's Fiction

I don't think I have any pleasure in any part of my body, because my first and initial body thoughts were blackened by the fear of sin (O'Brien qtd. in Eckley 71).

Thus far, this thesis has centred on the twentieth-century rural Irish family and the profound power of the parent-child relationship in O'Brien's fiction. This final chapter will continue to explore the Irish family and community, but will specifically examine O'Brien's protagonists' experiences and perceptions of their own emerging sexualities as young women. This focus upon sexuality is inescapable in any discussion of Irish girlhood since a young girl's growing awareness of her body and of herself as a sexual being is a crucial part of her self-development and journey towards womanhood.

Within her writing, O'Brien's female protagonists convey that what should be a positive and joyous entrance into womanhood is often marred by feelings of powerlessness and shame. These negative feelings, as well as an enforced ignorance about sex and the body, are often instilled in the protagonists by other women who believe they are living by higher moral and religious standards and, by virtue of their Roman Catholic upbringing, are passing these values down to subsequent generations, despite the obvious suffering they inflict upon the young girls placed in their "care," that is, under their "control." Adding to deep-seated feelings of shame, O'Brien's protagonists' first experiences of sex are often tarnished by

sexual violence and exploitation by male figures of authority. These traumatizing occurrences are, almost without exception, initially blamed on the protagonists: they are guilty of provoking or instigating these sexual crimes. O'Brien's novels suggest how female sexuality in twentieth-century Ireland was, in a strange way, viewed as a curse rather than as a blessing, since her female protagonists' bodies are often used and abused. O'Brien presents a rural (and urban) Irish society wherein women's bodies are often punished for being "sinful" by men and women equally, as well as being frequently objectified and violated by men themselves. In O'Brien's novels, it emerges that both men and women play a role in perpetuating this sexual oppression in twentieth-century Ireland. In these ways, O'Brien skilfully portrays the adverse effects of the restrictive ideology of patriarchy upon the most vulnerable group in her Irish nation: young women attempting to find their own sexual and emotional identities in a culture that often greatly hinders their ability to develop these crucial aspects of themselves.

Foucault and Sexuality in Western Society

Sex and the body have historically been highly controversial if not taboo subjects in Ireland, a taboo orchestrated and enforced by the combined powers of the Catholic Church and the State. Of course, sexual repression, controversy and censorship did not occur uniquely within Ireland, but have existed in many forms in different cultures and time periods throughout history. Volume I of Michel Foucault's highly influential work, *The History of Sexuality*, discusses Western society's attempts to control, regulate, and label human sexuality from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. Significantly, Foucault argues that this intense desire to discuss, analyze, and define sexuality only serves to reveal Western civilization's enduring preoccupation and even obsession with this topic. He

describes how female sexuality and desire were historically viewed with great fear and distrust, and in many cases, were seen as mental disorders and/or as physical illnesses that needed to be treated by professionals (Foucault 104). This conception of the female body and of female sexual desire as pathological and sinful has been in existence for centuries and these morbid ideas continue to endure, on some level, within our Western cultural consciousness to the present day.

Although, as Foucault argues, we believe sex to be considerably more “liberated” in the twentieth (and twenty-first) century, hierarchies, prejudices and stigmas surrounding sexuality have evidently not disappeared and many of these same attitudes prevailed in Ireland (and elsewhere) right to the end of the century. This deeply-ingrained fear of women’s bodies and sexualities is vividly conveyed in O’Brien’s portrayal of twentieth-century Ireland. One could go so far as to say that female sexuality is a central theme in O’Brien’s fiction about women and girls. Her novels are evidence of her desire to bring this complex subject to light and to examine the simultaneous fear and fascination that her Irish nations feels about the topic of sex. As this chapter will demonstrate, an unhealthy social censorship and ensuing “culture of shame” about sex can actually enable and even promote sexual violence, abuse, and exploitation of women’s bodies.

The Female Face of Patriarchy in O’Brien’s Fiction

In her fiction, O’Brien demonstrates how women can play a significant role in contributing to one another’s oppression, often through their strong associations and self-identification with historically patriarchal ideologies such as Catholicism. In these works, O’Brien presents the viewpoint that the female religious community in mid-to-late twentieth-century Ireland often did not provide adolescent girls with a proper sexual

education as well as the freedom to make their own informed choices about their bodies and sexualities.

Her portrayal of the all-girls convent school where Cait and Baba study for three years in *The Country Girls* seems to be partially inspired by personal experience, given the fact that O'Brien herself was educated at a convent school in Galway in the late 1940s, as she describes in her memoir, *Mother Ireland*. As a prime example of the shame and silence surrounding female sexuality that is endorsed by the nuns in this novel, Cait and her fellow students are made to feel ashamed to change clothes in front of one another in their open dormitory, since, as a nun explains, their bodies are meant to be hidden away from sight at all times. As the nun describes to Cait and Baba on their first frightening night away from home in the convent:

The new girls won't know this, but our convent has always been proud of its modesty. Our girls, above anything else, are good and wholesome and modest. One expression of modesty is the way a girl dresses and undresses. She should do so with decorum and modesty. ... Girls should face the foot of the bed, doing this, as they might surprise each other if they face the side of the bed. (*CG* 77)

At the age of fourteen, when girls are most likely to have many questions about their bodies, they are taught to fear and feel embarrassed by the sight of one another's bodies and especially by their own. They are told to equate hiding one's body with being "good" and "modest," thereby instilling in them the idea that the body is sinful. Even revealing an accidental glimpse of the female body is wrong and shameful. Furthermore, as evidence of the nuns' immense discomfort in speaking of sex or even hearing the term being discussed, the nuns entirely avoid the issue by inviting a priest to the convent to give the girls a lecture

about sex: “Sister Margaret did not wish that the nuns should come into the chapel while it was going on, as the priest spoke very frankly about boys and sex and things” (*CG* 111).

Since this talk is presented from the point of view of a male religious authority figure while the nuns anxiously avoid the discussion, it can be assumed that the female students are left with potentially frightening, conflicting and inaccurate ideas about sex.

In her dissertation on O’Brien’s fiction, Kathleen Jacquette further describes the complex role that the nuns played in Irish society:

On the one hand, women were given the opportunity to participate in the religious life of Catholicism. The convent offered them a chance for another life; they were revered, respected and feared. Nominally, they had more power than their secular counterparts. Yet, the irony is that these women were instrumental in continuing the Irish patriarchy. Both nuns and mothers, products of their culture, encouraged and demanded compliance from the younger generation. ... Irish girls were given educational opportunities, but independent thought was discouraged, and an anti-intellectualism prevailed. (142)

Jacquette touches upon the unfortunate irony that while the Irish nuns were granted a degree of power and status in society as women devoted to the Church, they attained this authority largely by conforming to and teaching patriarchal messages that discouraged their female pupils from asking questions and attempting to move beyond the prescribed role set out for Irish Catholic women.

While Cait internalizes the nuns’ doctrine of guilt and self-denial, causing her to feel even more grief-stricken and isolated after her mother’s death, impetuous and daring Baba devises a perfect plan of escape for them both by leaving a note in sight of the nuns, which

both she and Cait sign, that contains the most horrid implication of all: sexual relations between a nun and a priest at the convent. Baba cleverly realizes that the most effective way to attain freedom from the stifling and punitive convent is to provoke expulsion by employing the “obscene” sexual language that the students have been instructed to fear and despise. When the note is found by a nun, “she went purple in the mouth and began to fume around the recreation hall. She beat several girls with her strap, and she was yelling, ‘Where are they, where are they, those children of Satan!’” (*CG* 115) Furthermore, the Reverend Mother coldly states to a tearful and apologetic Cait, “Your mind is so despicable that I cannot conceive how you have gone unnoticed all those years” (*CG* 115), and she informs Cait and Baba that they will be sent home immediately. Thus, Baba’s plot is to turn their Catholic education on its head by using the “vulgar” language of sexuality to ensure both girls’ immediate banishment from the convent.

For the seemingly fearless Baba, witnessing the success of her subversive plan is powerfully exhilarating and liberating. In contrast, Cait’s tendency towards feelings of guilt, shame, and anxiety causes her to experience intense despair and shock over her expulsion from the school. In her last night at the convent, she lies awake all night, “thinking of some way that I could put an end to my life” (*CG* 116). She is humiliated by the Reverend Mother’s angry and belittling words, and, furthermore, she dreads the day to come as she knows that her father will violently berate her upon her shameful return home. Unfortunately, she is right, and upon seeing her, Cait’s father immediately calls her a “‘stinking little foul mouth,’ and he [strikes her] a terrific blow” (*CG* 117), enacting the patriarchal punishment that inevitably awaits Irish Catholic girls who demonstrate “deviant” behaviour, especially when it relates to sex.

O'Brien poignantly conveys the humour, the sense of adventure, yet also the injustice and loss underlying Baba's and Cait's escape from the convent. Due to this fateful "dirty note," neither girl receives her secondary education, which limits each girl's options for employment as well as her ability to have financial independence from her abusive father and/or husband, as O'Brien reveals in the subsequent volumes of *The Country Girls Trilogy*. Moreover, the note cuts short Cait's dream to pursue the study of literature, which is revealed when she wistfully lies and says she is studying English at college while on a date with an older man later in the novel (CG 158), and when O'Brien refers to Cait's love of Shakespeare's sonnets and James Joyce (CG 159). Although Cait has the opportunity to attend another convent school as one of the top students receiving a full scholarship, she chooses instead to follow Baba to Dublin, where she ends up working in a grocery shop. She does not return to school or attend university throughout *The Country Girls Trilogy*. Consequently, O'Brien demonstrates how several options are restricted far too quickly for her young heroines, and she does not ignore the role that other women play in bringing about these events. Firstly, Baba's plot to free them from the convent is symbolic of the unhealthy power dynamic that exists between the two girls throughout *The Country Girls*, since Cait feels intimidated to voice her hesitations about writing the "dirty" note to the feisty, headstrong and sometimes aggressive Baba and, therefore, she must also suffer the consequences of her plan. Through their friendship, O'Brien suggests some of the ways that girls and women might oppress one another while trying to survive in a male-dominated society. Although Baba's actions are courageous and allow the two girls to experience a sense of newfound liberation in Dublin away from the confines of home and school, Baba nonetheless does not and cannot foresee the ways in which she and Cait will both be unfairly

punished for their moment of adolescent rebellion. She does not understand that women devoid of an education have no options beyond marriage and motherhood. Furthermore, O'Brien shows how the nuns' lack of understanding and compassion for their female pupils, as well as their restricted view of female sexuality and the body as being inherently sinful, lead to immense barriers being placed between teacher and student. Such constrictions ultimately cause her protagonists to reject and abandon their prison-like environment and hence their education as a whole.

Similar to the nuns' condemnations of sex and the female body in *The Country Girls*, in *Down by the River*, Mary is psychologically violated by the Catholic women who join forces against her in an attempt to stop her from having an abortion after she is raped and impregnated by her father. In fact, a group of women from her village are waiting to meet her after she is forced to return home from England without having an abortion, claiming that they are now in "charge of things" (DBTR 151). O'Brien portrays the women's skewed sense of morality throughout the novel, which allows them to believe they are "saving" Mary by attempting to intimidate, manipulate, and frighten her so that she does not "kill an innocent baby" (DBTR 185). Ironically, the women do not see the ways in which they themselves are actually harming an innocent child, by driving Mary to utter despair and self-hatred, and thus causing her to have a strong desire to end her own life. Mary's loathing of her own body and her frightening apathy towards life intensifies as the novel progresses and she becomes more deeply traumatized by the condemnations of these women: "She never looked down at herself, her body was hateful, an alien" (DBTR 180).

Furthermore, these women's views are shared by the majority of Mary's community, made evident through the village newspaper which portrays her father as the victim and not

as a possible perpetrator of Mary's sexual assault, and in which an Irish "Garda" (police officer) is quoted as saying, "'That lovely home is broken forever and so is our beautiful, wholesome happy parish'" (*DBTR* 212). Evidently, Mary is blamed for tarnishing not only the image of her home but also for ruining the "wholesomeness" of her entire parish.

O'Brien conveys the heated national debate surrounding Mary's pregnancy through her description of a call-in radio show that Mary accidentally starts listening to, called "Magdalene vs. the nation," where listeners voice their opinions about the case, and in which several callers side against Mary and blame her for becoming pregnant, calling her a "slut," and a "little schemer." "Send her to the laundry that she's named after ... I'd make her scrub" (*DBTR* 187). This intense reaction to Mary's desire to have an abortion is, of course, reflecting the highly controversial 1992 legal case of "Miss X," which sparked widespread public debate and even outrage in Ireland, as O'Brien's novel demonstrates.¹

At this point in the novel, the women and the community are in denial that Mary's father is the obvious perpetrator of this sexual crime; however, they do know that she has been sexually assaulted by an as yet "unidentified" man. Even with this knowledge of the brutal violence committed against her, one of the women explains to her that this situation is all the more reason to give birth, asking her:

... did she realize the miracle that had happened, that it was that thing, the little life growing in the depths of her body, which brought the truth to light, the whole sordid business of rape, that the little life was the saviour and that it would also save the rapist, because all rapists long for the day when somebody would find them out and put a stop to what they know to be shameful but which they cannot control. If any of her daughters was in the same predicament she would see it for what it was, part of

God's design, and Mary must see that too, see the pregnancy as a solution and not a problem, as a gift from God. (*DBTR* 152)

The women attempt to "convert" Mary to their fundamentalist Catholic belief that a woman should give birth to a child conceived out of rape so that she can "save" the rapist.

Meanwhile, the rapist is essentially portrayed as the victim in this situation since he cannot "control" his actions, while Mary is also expected to renounce control over her own life and body and view her pregnancy as part of "God's design." Sophia Hillan offers the controversial yet thought-provoking viewpoint that these women do the most harm to Mary, even when compared to the abuse of her father:

...worst of all, the "right-thinking" women, who, in a parody of nurturing Mary and her unborn child, damage both far more than the abuse of her father could. He, at least, bent and broken ... indeed like so many fathers in earlier O'Brien novels-- loves his daughter somewhere in his self-hatred and despair. The women, with few exceptions, lack compassion. (51)

Hillan views these female anti-abortionists as perhaps the most threatening "villains" in the novel, since they are portrayed as being incapable of questioning their beliefs and putting them into context or of showing even a glimmer of sympathy for Mary's horrifying predicament. Ironically, it is Mary's father who is, by the end of the novel, so wracked with grief over his despicable actions towards his daughter that he takes his own life.

Similar to the nuns in *The Country Girls*, the women attempt to indoctrinate Mary with their one-sided, misogynist view of the female body. They even deny Mary the right to claim her body and her pregnancy as her own. Roisin, who is the most resolute "pro-life" advocate and leader of this anti-abortion women's group, does not believe Mary should even

have a say in this decision since in her view the fetus does not truly belong to her: “ ‘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” (*DBTR* 154). Although Mary struggles with feelings of doubt and shame, her defiant words demonstrate her refusal to succumb to the manipulative pleas of these women who desperately try to break down her will and turn her into a symbol of their beliefs. As O’Brien pointed out in an interview: “The female body in *Down by the River* is something that others, her father and the pro-life zealots, wish to possess” (Thompson 201). Therefore, in *The Country Girls* and *Down by the River*, both the nuns and the anti-abortionists can be viewed as exploiting the power they have been given through their role within the Church by seeking to exert control over the bodies, minds, and sexualities of the young girls placed within their care.

Painful Pregnancies

Further delving into the often traumatizing reality of being young, unmarried and pregnant, *A Pagan Place* and the short story “Savages” feature very similar and tragic events that convey the intense fear of the female body and sexuality that dominated in 1940s and ’50s Ireland. Both works describe, from the young female narrator’s perspective, the shame and hostility often felt within the Irish community and family at this time with respect to young, single women who became pregnant. These pregnancies are not personally experienced by the young female narrators in these works, but rather, by an older sister and neighbour, respectively, whom the young narrators are both fascinated by and look up to as being far more knowledgeable and sophisticated than themselves. For this reason, these stories are significant to discuss, since the narrators both witness the tragic outcomes of

these pregnancies, so that they are each sent a clear message about the dangers of female sexuality and the consequences of deviating from the cultural norms. In *A Pagan Place*, the narrator's older sister, Emma, returns home from Dublin for a visit, and it is immediately noticed that she "had got fat" (*PP* 100) and that she is sent by the doctor to a spa out of town for an "internal complaint" (*PP* 116). Her parents suspect at once that she is pregnant. This suspicion is confirmed in her mother's mind when she comes across Emma's diary, which she reads and describes as "sacrilege ... a cesspool, a veritable Hades, a chronicle of vice and filth" (*PP* 112) in its recounting of her sexual experiences with various men in the city. Before Emma even has a chance to confirm or deny whether she is actually pregnant, "the whole village was buzzing" about her (*PP* 114), a fact that seems to upset her mother far more than any concern she has for her daughter's well-being. In what seems to be almost a rite of passage in O'Brien's novels, when the dire news is confirmed and the father is made aware of his daughter's sexual transgressions and her potential to shame the family name, he attempts to strike her and verbally lashes out at her, asking her "what pack of lies she would like to unleash before he polished her off" (*PP* 127). As the young narrator describes, "Her death would have simplified everything then. It was the only solution. It was what you all wanted, her death and her burial" (*PP* 129). Though only a child of twelve, the narrator has been so well-warned of the utter devastation of being a "fallen" woman that she repeats the warped message she has absorbed: that it would be better for her sister to die than for her family to deal with the shame of her pregnancy.

Since Emma does not know who the father of her child is and therefore cannot be "married off," her parents send her to "lodgings with some devout lady, some good Samaritan who took care of such people" (*PP* 137). Echoing the mentality of the many Irish

families who sent their daughters to the Magdalen Laundries,² the parents' primary concern is to make their daughter disappear from the home as quickly as possible in an attempt to disassociate themselves from her and hopefully lessen the damage done to their reputation in the community. As the narrator remarks, "Your mother had brought no baby clothes because it was already arranged that Emma's baby would be handed over to the State a few seconds after it was born" (*PP* 147). Thus, Emma loses the right to decide whether or not she will keep her baby, since the baby was "conceived in sin" and is therefore branded as being illegitimate. In a memorable turn of events, however, O'Brien alters this all-too-familiar Irish scenario so that after Emma gives birth and her baby boy is sent to an orphanage, it is Emma who refuses to return home to see her parents. In fact, when her mother sends her a letter, "without any qualm [Emma] held it to the flame of the candle. It made a small but noticeable blaze" (*PP* 168). Through this small but decidedly defiant act, Emma attempts to reclaim her personal power and dignity that were so utterly demeaned by her family during her pregnancy. After realizing that her daughter has actually rejected her, rather than the reverse, the narrator describes that her mother "made no reference to the baby, she simply said the end of an epoch. It would never be mentioned again; it would never be referred to, by name" (*PP* 172). Rather than admitting any fault in bringing about her daughter's and grandson's alienation from the family, the mother tries to convince herself that it is simply the end of an "epoch" and continues on with her daily tasks.

In "Savages," this situation is almost exactly replicated, when the neighbour's daughter, Mabel, returns home from Australia and it is remarked that she had "grown a bit too stout," sparking a "ghastly rumour" that Mabel is pregnant that "resounded throughout the parish" (*RT* 101). This rumour is supposedly legitimized when a group of women decide to trick

Mabel by inviting her to tea and sneaking up behind her to measure her waist, after which they confirm she “was huge and by nightfall the conclusion was that Mabel was indeed having a baby” (RT 102). As the narrator describes, “After that she was shunned at Mass, shunned on her way down from Mass, and avoided when she went into the shops. People were weird in the punishments they thought should be meted out to her” (RT 102). The narrator points out the absurdity of the town’s fear of Mabel, as though she is carrying a contagious disease and must be avoided at all times. Also paralleling *A Pagan Place*, Mabel’s parents are devastated and her father’s outraged reaction is inevitable: “His shock upon hearing it was such that he could be heard roaring half a mile away and it seems it took three people to hold him down as he threatened to go to Mabel’s room in order to kill her” (RT 104).

Echoing the conclusion to Emma’s tragic ordeal in *A Pagan Place*, O’Brien constructs an unexpected and equally poignant and disturbing ending to this story. When it appears as though Mabel is going into labour, the doctor is called to the house, where, upon examining her, he announces, “She’s no more pregnant than I am” (RT 105). It is instantly realized that Mabel was so ignorant about sex and frightened by everyone’s insistence she was pregnant (it is also hinted by O’Brien that she has an unidentified mental disability) that she actually believed the rumours to be true, when in fact, she had simply gained a considerable amount of weight. Rather than her family expressing any remorse or pity for the psychological trauma they have inflicted upon their daughter, the narrator explains, “No one went near her. It was if she had taken the marks of a leper. Her mother glared in that direction and said that her only daughter had brought them nothing but disaster. To have to tell this to the parish was the last straw” (RT 106). Similar to the mother in *A Pagan Place*, Mabel’s mother

seems to think only of the humiliation she will have to endure in the parish, and blames her daughter entirely for this absurd and unjust situation in which Mabel was clearly the victim.

Echoing Emma's self-exile from her family and community, the narrator explains:

We did not lay eyes on Mabel again. ... She refused to see anyone and barely broke her fast. One evening, after dark, she left as she had once arrived, in a hackney car and from that moment her memory was banished. ... Her parents had a Mass said in the house and in time it was as if she had never come home, as if she were still in Australia (*RT* 107).

In the powerful and spine-chilling ending to this story, Mabel's parents act as though she no longer exists, and even feel it necessary to have a Mass said in their home after her departure, as though their house needed to be "cleansed" of her "sinful" presence so that her memory can be forgotten. In comparing and contrasting Emma's pregnancy in *A Pagan Place* with Mabel's in "Savages," a very similar message can be drawn from both of these works. Both stories present the parents' and villagers' beliefs that it makes little difference whether or not these young women are, in fact, pregnant. Instead, the community is not interested in the truth, but is perversely preoccupied with condemning and gossiping about both women, while the parents are mainly concerned about the negative consequences to their all-important reputation. This pathetic paradox is evident when the parents in both works show minimal concern for their daughters' well-being, both during and after their real or "imagined" pregnancies. Emma's parents in *A Pagan Place* may inwardly feel a sense of grief after being shunned by her; however, they quickly change the subject away from their "wayward" daughter (*PP* 173). In "Savages," Mabel's parents feel very little remorse and appear relieved to be "rid" of their daughter and all of the trouble she apparently caused.

Both of these works shed further light upon Chapters One and Two and their discussion of the parental figures within O'Brien's fiction, by once again depicting the often strained and painful relationship of young women with both their mothers and fathers, particularly when the issues of generational conflict are related to their sexualities and to their bodies.

Heather Ingman explains how nationalism played a central role in narrowly defining and consequently oppressing women's sexualities in Ireland:

If Irish men were supposed to, and did, lay down their lives for Ireland's Irish women, with the example of the Virgin Mary set before them, they were meant to embody the purity of the Irish nation. Sexuality thus became bound up with nationality. A certain female behaviour, based on chastity and purity, guaranteed the purity and alterity of the Irish nation. The sexually loose woman was not only shocking, she was seen as anti-Irish or "foreign." Very often she had to be expelled, if not from her country, at least from her family or her community. ... In other words, Ireland authenticated its Catholic identity largely through its women, and nationalism in Ireland became the language through which sexual control and repression of women were justified. ("Stretching Boundaries" 254)

Irish women were expected to uphold the "moral" character of their recently liberated and staunchly Catholic nation through their "proper" behaviour; therefore, their sexual activities and desires were tightly controlled and suppressed through the conflation of Church and State. As Ingman describes, young women who were viewed as a threat to this idealized vision of Catholic Ireland through their bodies and sexualities were quite often literally "expelled" from their homes, an occurrence that is portrayed not only in O'Brien's fiction but that was also a reality within twentieth-century Irish society.

Vulnerable to Exploitation: O'Brien's Young Narrators

As another significant thread within her fiction, O'Brien portrays the ways in which her young female protagonists' lack of proper education and knowledge about sex causes them to be highly vulnerable to male sexual exploitation. These experiences of male violence and abuse are sometimes portrayed as direct sexual attacks upon her female characters. However, this violence also manifests itself psychologically and emotionally through threats or implications of sexual violence, or through a more subtle but equally harmful "seduction" or manipulation of her young female characters' bodies and minds by male figures in positions of power. These scenes further underscore the threatening and ominous tone that is frequently present in these fictional works and they echo the violent father-daughter relationship discussed in Chapter Two, since they depict young girls in extremely vulnerable positions where they are unable to escape violence and exploitation at the hands of threatening, dominating male "villains." In *A Pagan Place*, O'Brien constructs a rural Irish world in which it is often difficult to know which men, if any, can be trusted by her female narrator. She describes the "village fool" in the opening of the novel as being a notoriously dangerous figure who drunkenly antagonizes young girls and women:

Going home drunk he took off his breeches by the water pump and when girls and women went by, he said Come here missie, until I do pooly in you, but if the guards or the sergeant went by he insisted that he was having a footbath. The girls used to fly past and when he couldn't catch them he did pooly anyhow, that was not pooly at all but white stuff. Then he went on home cursing and blinding and laughing like a jackass. (PP 23)

Significantly, the narrator describes how the male police force is of very little assistance

to women and girls who are subjected to this man's recurring sexual threats and degrading taunts. Her only protection is to be on her guard and run away in order to escape from his violent advances.

While the narrator is aware of the threat posed by this obviously dangerous man, she is entirely unprepared for the much more complex psychological and emotional manipulation that she experiences when she finds herself alone with the village's young and charming new priest. In fact, even previous to this incident and in the presence of her parents, the priest brazenly writes an inappropriate passage in the narrator's copy book while he is visiting their home, which states, "My body is but a cabbage/ The leaves I give to others/ But the heart I give/ To you" (*PP* 189). The priest is well-aware of the narrator's innocent "crush" on him as the handsome and well-liked village curate, a situation that he then takes full advantage of when they are alone on the houseboat. The narrator is curious and naïve about sex and invests a feeling of complete emotional and spiritual trust in the priest, so that even when he begins to undress her and sexually touch her, she thinks, "You were not afraid. It was an honour" (*PP* 195). She does not comprehend that the priest is clearly exploiting his position of authority. Indeed, it is because of his authority that she initially believes herself to be safe and very special as the object of his desire. However, when the priest forcefully attempts to have sex with her, the narrator firmly resists and describes that she is "petrified" (*PP* 196) and after the priest masturbates on top of her, she cries and wishes there was some way she could "undo the harm" (*PP* 197). She is aware that some part of her has changed forever and that her previous "innocence" has been lost-- not simply because she has been sexually violated but because her trust in adult figures such as the priest and her parents has been shattered. After this incident, she is the one who is brutally

punished by her father for the violent encounter. As discussed in greater detail in Chapter One, both of these events compel her to escape from her home and village and join the convent overseas, in an attempt to embark upon a new life and identity away from this damaging male violence.

In the short story “Courtship,” the narrator’s intuition tells her that Tom, the cousin of a family whom she visits on holiday, is not to be trusted due to his obvious “salaciousness” (RT 118) in her presence. However, when he invites her to the cinema with him, since none of his family protests or sees reason to be concerned, the narrator feels powerless to question his intentions openly. Unfortunately, her gut feeling about Tom proves to be accurate when he persistently touches her throughout the film, so that all she can do is “let out a cry” in the theatre to defend herself (RT 119). After the film, Tom blames the narrator for being a “tease” and angrily asks her, “why do such a thing, why egg him on with ringlets and smiles and then make a holy show of him” (RT 119). He then proceeds to push her up against a fence with his body; luckily, however, she is able to resist his attempt to sexually assault her by having a “fit” in which she screams and says “disjointed things” until he desists. He then slaps her across the face, and they ride their bikes home together in silence (RT 120).

In each of these scenes, O’Brien depicts the sheer vulnerability of her young female protagonists against the threat of a male sexual attack due to their lack of accurate knowledge about sex, their limited options to defend themselves either physically or verbally, and, perhaps most significantly, due to their society’s tendency to turn a blind eye and to protect the male perpetrators of these crimes first and foremost. For example, in the case of the priest in *A Pagan Place* and Tom in “Courtship,” both men are viewed as being respectable, powerful and trustworthy members of their community or family, so that no one

assumes or acknowledges that they have the capability to be dangerous sexual predators. It is almost always O'Brien's female protagonists who reveal them to be what they are and are unjustly punished as the instigators rather than the victims of their sexual crimes.

In *The Country Girls*, Cait's first sexual and romantic experiences with Mr. Gentleman are certainly exploitative on some level, since, as a married man who is the same age as her father, he emotionally manipulates Cait and engages her in the beginnings of a sexual relationship with him (which is never actually consummated). Similar to the "crush" that the *Pagan Place* narrator has on the village priest, Cait is too naïve and trusting to understand the abuse of power that is occurring and she seems to long for Mr. Gentleman to provide her with the sense of protection she lacks within her unhappy home. In fact, it is likely due to the immense emotional disconnection she experiences from her own father that Cait seeks an almost paternal affection from Mr. Gentleman, which is made evident when he calls her his "freckle-faced daughter" (CG 11) as a term of endearment. However, like O'Brien's mother figures' secret sexual liaisons with the village doctors, discussed in Chapter One, it is too simplistic to view this relationship as entirely exploitative. Cait and Mr. Gentleman seem to understand one another's hidden inner sadness and she experiences rare moments of happiness and even bliss in his presence, as well as her first awareness of her own sexual desires. Cait's brief, secret encounters with Mr. Gentleman allow her to escape temporarily from the emotional isolation of her everyday life and the grief of her mother's death:

He cupped my face between his cold hands and very solemnly and very sadly he said what I had expected him to say. And that moment was wholly and totally perfect for me; and everything I had suffered up to then was comforted in the softness of his soft, lisping voice; whispering, whispering, like the snow-flakes. ... He kissed me. It

was a real kiss. It affected my entire body” (CG 99).

However, in the conclusion to *The Country Girls*, Mr. Gentleman suddenly fears the consequences of their forbidden relationship and cuts off contact with Cait without warning, to return, presumably unscathed, to his life as an esteemed man of the community.

Meanwhile, Cait’s first experiences of sexual and emotional attachment leave her feeling abandoned and disillusioned so that she seems to be the one who is left to suffer for being sexually pursued by a man, similar to O’Brien’s other female protagonists discussed above.

Forbidden Female Love

Another significant example of a relationship that is severed in order to adhere to social norms in a patriarchal society is found in O’Brien’s short story “Sister Imelda.” In this story, the narrator, who is perhaps fourteen or fifteen, develops a strong attachment to one of the younger nuns at her boarding school. Throughout the story, O’Brien conveys the sense that Sister Imelda and the narrator have strong feelings for one another that are deeply emotional but that also border on being covertly romantic and even potentially sexual. The affection and passion that the narrator feels for her teacher are made evident when she thinks of her as someone who “passed the boundaries of common exchange and who crept inside one, devouring so much of one’s thoughts, so much of one’s passion, invading the place that was called one’s heart” (RT 139). The narrator even dreams of “[her] nun” (RT 139) at night and she longs to know her hair colour and about her mysterious past at university before she entered the convent. Sister Imelda subtly returns the narrator’s feelings, by handwriting special devotional passages in her prayer book, giving her small gifts, telling the narrator that she missed her over the holidays, and embracing her on various occasions in order to comfort her.

Although the nun and the narrator are clearly in different power roles as teacher and student, their relationship does not seem exploitative as with the narrator and the priest in *A Pagan Place* or with Cait and Mr. Gentleman in *The Country Girls*. Sister Imelda does not show affection for the narrator that makes her feel uncomfortable or pressured and their relationship remains within the emotional realm without moving to the physical (aside from their mutually affectionate glances and brief hugs). Of course, the convent does not condone any sort of strong attachment between the nuns and students, which is made evident when the Mother Superior sees the growing emotional bond between Sister Imelda and the narrator and frowns at this “glaring intimacy” (RT 149). Sister Imelda is aware of the dangers of their relationship, and she warns the narrator that “it is not proper for us to be so friendly ... We must not become attached” (RT 148). The narrator replies to Sister Imelda that their attachment is “not wrong” and thinks to herself, “Convents were dungeons and no doubt about it” (RT 148). Despite her view of the convent as a prison, the narrator decides that the only way for their relationship to endure is if she, too, becomes a nun. The narrator seems content to sustain their bond on a solely emotional level, and she does not consciously consider the possibility of a physical relationship within this forbidden environment. However, she changes her mind about becoming a nun after her convent schooling is finished and instead attends university, ultimately losing contact with Sister Imelda. In her discussion of this story, Helen Thompson argues that the narrator’s ambivalence about becoming a nun is a reflection of her confusion and anxiety about her own sexuality:

Indeed, the crux of the narrator’s struggle with her emerging lesbian identity exists in the uncanny paradox of both desiring and fearing a female lover; of wishing to

be like her so that they can continue their relationship, yet dreading the loss of identity; of needing to follow her lesbian instinct yet fearing punishment for her transgressive sexuality. (37)

As Thompson describes, the narrator is torn between her strong feelings for Sister Imelda, and her fear of pursuing a relationship which she knows is forbidden and would be condemned if it were to be discovered.

In the story's poignant conclusion, the narrative jumps to a couple of years later in Dublin, when the narrator, who has just been thinking about the nun, suddenly spots her sitting on the bus. She is overcome by feelings of "excitement and dread" (*RT* 156) upon seeing her and she longs to escape from the bus unseen, yet she also wishes, on some level, that she could approach her and say something meaningful about her feelings. However, before she has a chance to decide on her course of action, Sister Imelda departs from the bus. The narrator reflects:

In some ways I felt worse than if I had confronted [her]. I cannot be certain what I would have said. I knew that there is something sad and faintly distasteful about love's ending, particularly love that has never been fully realised. I might have hinted at that but I doubt it. In our deepest moments we say the most inadequate things. (*RT* 158)

The depth of the narrator's feelings is made evident in this final passage, since even years later, she feels simultaneously thrilled to see Sister Imelda and saddened by the fact that it was never possible for them to freely express their feelings for one another.

As the final short story in *Returning*, "Sister Imelda" stands in contrast to the other stories in this collection, yet it also provides further commentary on the common theme of

adolescent female sexuality found in all of these discussed works. The young narrators in each of these works often experience pain and exploitation in their interactions with men, and they feel powerless, for the most part, within these relationships. By contrast, the narrator of “Sister Imelda” longs to explore her feelings of desire and attachment for a woman within a potentially nurturing relationship, yet she fears the consequences of doing so either within the walls of the convent or outside of them. This sense of the narrator’s continued sexual confusion is implied at the end of the story when she mentions that she is on the bus with her friend, Baba, on the way to meet some “businessmen” (RT 156) yet evidently her thoughts are consumed by Sister Imelda and not by her upcoming date with these men. As Thompson points out, “the narrator’s lesbian desire is sublimated rather than resolved and her heterosexual stance is less a conscious choice of a masculine love object and more a decision to conform to rather than transgress social norms” (40). In this way, the narrator can also be interpreted as a victim of her patriarchal and heterosexist 1950s Irish culture, in that she feels unable to express her desires, not even to her friend Baba, or to explore her sexual identity more openly, since she fears the potential consequences of being judged or even alienated by those around her. Evidently, “Sister Imelda” adds further layers of complexity and insight to the many challenges that O’Brien’s protagonists experience in their exploration of their sexual and emotional selves, and it underscores the fact that Irish female sexuality in O’Brien’s fictional world encompasses not only heterosexual but also homosexual desires.

A Voice of Hope?

Finally, it is highly significant to return to O’Brien’s most recent young heroine, Mary, from *Down by the River*, and the way in which she emerges as a survivor from her traumatic

experiences. In the final sentences of *Down by the River*, O'Brien emphasizes Mary's inner strength as she sings karaoke at a disco in front of a crowd of people:

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 souls' innermost cries. (DBTR 265)

Mary's voice is described as having the ability to silence everyone in the room, many of whom likely condemned and judged her during her pregnancy, as though they are now realizing her innocence and courage and their own collective guilt in shunning her and making her tragic ordeal even more painful. As Ann Norton similarly points out:

...the Irish audience's 'innermost' selves, uncensored by social, political, or cultural rules and memories, recognize that Mary is more than an ill-educated country girl impregnated out of wedlock. As a scapegoat, and as a human being who has suffered and survived, she merits reconciliation, respect, and love, as do the people who hear her sing. (84)

Thus, through the audience's silence, they demonstrate their reverence for her bravery and a sense of empathy for what she has endured.

Also drawing from this final passage in *Down by the River*, Sara Gerend emphasizes the great significance in O'Brien's choosing to write this novel only five years after the immense controversy surrounding the 1992 "Case of X" in Ireland:

By choosing to articulate the story of the silenced Magdalenes of Ireland in *Down by the River*, O'Brien creates a new, vital space in which Irish women can speak,

“melting” the silence surrounding the issues of motherhood, choice, and abortion in Ireland. (51)

Through this novel, O’Brien gives an unforgettable voice to young, unwed pregnant women who may or may not want to give birth to their child—a typically victimized and silenced group within Irish society.

Furthermore, as O’Brien’s most recent adolescent heroine, Mary stands out from the earlier young protagonists in that O’Brien uses language that is clearly redemptive and hopeful to describe Mary’s powerful singing at the end of the novel. This scene contrasts significantly with the conclusions to *The Country Girls*, *A Pagan Place*, as well as with the short stories selected from *Returning*, in which the protagonists’ feelings of confusion and isolation in reaction to their first sexual experiences are emphasized and the overall tone is one of loss and regret.

To briefly recap these final scenes, firstly, in the closing to *The Country Girls*, Cait is left feeling abandoned and betrayed by Mr. Gentleman, and the novel ends with Cait’s lonely reflection that it “was almost certain that I wouldn’t sleep that night” (CG 188). Secondly, as a defining moment touched upon from various angles throughout this study, in the final pages of *A Pagan Place*, the narrator, feeling betrayed by the priest who sexually violates her and by her parents who punish her for this incident, decides to go “far, far away” (PP 213) to become a nun. Finally, as discussed above, *Returning* ends with the narrator of “Sister Imelda” feeling isolated in her inability to express her strong feelings for her former teacher. Evidently, the protagonists in *The Country Girls*, *A Pagan Place*, *Returning*, and *Down by the River* each experience a startling and painful break from their childhood selves by way of sex: whether this means questioning their sexual identity, having

their first sexual relationship, or as victims of sexual violence. Although Mary endures horrific sexual violence throughout *Down by the River*, the conclusions to these three earlier works are arguably bleaker by comparison, since O'Brien does not provide the same sense of hope that her earlier protagonists can heal from their pain in order to find their own identities and voices once again, as she points to with Mary's final scene. Therefore, the reader is left with the sense that these three earlier protagonists, depicted in 1940s and 50s Ireland, have been denied the opportunity to achieve the final stage of the typical *Bildungsroman* journey: personal fulfillment through self-actualization.

By contrast, Mary is etched upon the reader's mind as a character who has overcome unfathomable hardships but who refuses to give in to despair and defeat. Despite her village's and even her nation's attempts to control her body and her life, in the end, Mary stands up and literally makes her voice heard. Through song, Mary experiences a moment of transcendence which allows her to rise above her tragic circumstances in a way that leaves her community speechless. In this way, she takes a significant step towards maturity and self-actualization. Even though she evidently still has further steps to take in order to truly heal from her experiences and reclaim her voice, the step she takes at the novel's conclusion is certainly not insignificant. In fact, her final moment of "epiphany" and artistic self-expression is arguably just as poignant and meaningful as those experienced by the young artist figure Stephen Dedalus, as the most highly revered figure of the Irish *bildungsroman* genre.

Mary is also particularly memorable since her story brings Ireland's strict laws against abortion to light: a crucial issue relating to female sexuality that is still fiercely debated in the country to this day.³ Reflecting further upon Mary's "soaring" voice depicted at the

end of the novel, perhaps she represents a new voice of Irish girlhood, as a figure who continues to confront obstacles and oppressions with regards to her body and sexuality, but who, significantly, refuses to remain silent.

Notes

¹ The highly controversial case of “Miss X,” upon whom Mary in O’Brien’s *Down by the River* is based, involved a fourteen-year-old Irish girl who was raped and impregnated by a family friend (though in O’Brien’s novel, the perpetrator is Mary’s father) and who fought for the right to travel to England for an abortion in 1992, when it was deemed illegal to do so by the Irish government under any and all circumstances. After the Supreme Court ruled that this young girl’s life was in jeopardy due to her threatening to commit suicide and that the life of the mother should be considered equal to that of the “unborn,” the laws on abortion changed slightly in Ireland, so that abortion is now permitted, though only in the most exceptional of circumstances, when there is “a real and substantial risk to the life, as distinct from the health, of the mother” (Smyth 13). Furthermore, in reaction to the “Case of X,” Irish women gained the right to travel abroad legally for an abortion and to have access to information on foreign abortion services (Connolly and O’Toole 74). This case was groundbreaking in Ireland in the early 1990s, and the nation was divided as to whether or not this girl should be permitted to have an abortion or be forced to continue her pregnancy. For this reason, it is not difficult to understand why *Down by the River*, published only five years after this case, sparked considerable controversy in Ireland and “touched a nerve” with some readers within her Irish homeland upon its release.

² In *A Pagan Place* and “Savages,” O’Brien touches upon some of the actual injustices that were taking place in Ireland in the 1940s and even decades later to young single women who had the “misfortune” of becoming pregnant or who were merely rumoured to be sexually active before marriage. This punishment of female sexuality was brutally demonstrated in the prison-like confines of the Magdalen Laundries in Ireland. These were washhouses run

within Catholic convents in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and originated as “rehabilitation centres” for prostitutes (CBS News, “Magdalene Laundry,” par.20).

However, by the early twentieth century, they were essentially prisons where Irish Catholic adolescent girls were sent by their families and parish priests to “repent” for their perceived sexual transgressions. This could include teenage girls who became pregnant outside of marriage (even in cases of rape and incest), girls who were suspected of being sexually active, or girls who were simply labeled as being too flirtatious and attractive to men and, therefore, “sexually dangerous.” These young women were cast out of their families and were forced to do the laundry by hand for the institutions of their community, while the nuns received all of the profits for their work (CBS News, “Magdalene Laundry”). Numerous women endured horrendous physical, psychological, and sexual abuse at the hands of Catholic nuns and priests within these convents. With over thirty thousand Irish women being sent behind these walls in the twentieth century and the last laundry closing in Dublin only in 1996, the Magdalen Laundries are a horrific example of this punitive and fearful attitude towards female sexuality that existed even in late twentieth-century Ireland.

³ To the present day, the laws prohibiting abortion remain, so that thousands of Irish women must journey to England and other European nations each year in order to have access to a safe and legal abortion. In 2003, it was reported that an average of nineteen women a day travel to Britain for abortions (Connolly and O’Toole 74).

CONCLUSION

This thesis has sought to delve into O'Brien's complex, poignant, and challenging fictional depictions of mid-to-late twentieth-century rural Irish girlhood which, collectively, stand out as unique and highly memorable contributions to the Irish *Bildungsroman* tradition. In each of the four works-- *The Country Girls*, *A Pagan Place*, *Returning*, and *Down by the River*-- O'Brien's young female protagonists' girlhoods are described in terms of their relationships with both their mothers and fathers, as well as through a portrayal of their emerging sexualities in a patriarchal society. This thesis aimed to explore the psychological and emotional development of O'Brien's adolescent heroines by focusing in on each of these crucial themes and examine their defining experiences both within and outside of their homes as they journey towards womanhood.

These books end on an ambiguous note, leaving the reader uncertain as to what the future may hold for these young women. Will her adolescent characters grow up to embody the confining roles for women they are taught to comply with in their childhood? Or, instead, will they attempt to break out of these moulds and diverge from the traditional path prescribed for them by their parents and societies?

O'Brien does explore these next stages of Irish womanhood in several of her other novels and stories. For example, she features Cait's tumultuous adult life as mother and wife in *The Lonely Girl* and *Girls in their Married Bliss*, the subsequent two volumes of *The Country Girls' Trilogy*. Therefore, given more space and more time, this study could have traced the journeys not only of O'Brien's repressed and troubled adolescent female heroines but also those of some of her adult female characters within her many novels and stories,

(who are also often equally-troubled wives and mothers) in order to compare and contrast her female characters' experiences and feelings during these defining eras of their lives.

Chapter Three of this study touched upon the portrayal of lesbian desire within one of O'Brien's stories of Irish girlhood. While lesbian relationships and desires are portrayed in some of O'Brien's other works, this theme has not yet been explored in great depth by O'Brien scholars. These undercurrents of lesbian desire embedded within some of her novels and stories could be very interesting to delve into in future studies, as evidence of a way in which O'Brien subverts and re-envisions traditional views of Irish girlhood and womanhood and acknowledges the diverse and complex nature of female sexuality.

Expanding further upon this theme, future studies on contemporary Irish women's literature could compare and contrast O'Brien's novels and stories with the fictional works of, for example, acclaimed contemporary Irish-Canadian writer Emma Donoghue, who engages with the theme of lesbian relationships in her fiction. In her 1994 novel, *Stir-Fry*, Donoghue tells the compassionate "coming out" story of a seventeen-year-old Irish girl in 1980s Dublin.

This leads to yet another possibility for comparative studies featuring O'Brien's work. Further studies might compare O'Brien's depiction of twentieth-century "rural" Irish girlhood with other Irish writers, such as Donoghue and Nuala O'Faolain, and their depictions of "urban" Irish girlhood and womanhood, to see how their portrayal of this theme is potentially similar yet might also diverge along rural/urban lines. These types of studies might also allow a literary scholar to explore very current, twenty-first-century conceptions of Irish girlhood and to trace some of the startling cultural and political changes as well as stagnancies that have occurred in the everyday lives of adolescent girls, as

portrayed in Irish fiction. For example, future literary studies could compare and contrast contemporary fictional depictions of Irish girlhood in the highly cosmopolitan and affluent Irish society of the present day with O'Brien's coming-of-age novels and stories featuring young girls living in the relative poverty and social isolation of 1940s and even early 1990s rural Ireland.

On a personal note, in June 2007, I had the opportunity to present a paper on Edna O'Brien's fiction at the Canadian Association of Irish Studies' Annual Conference at Memorial University, Newfoundland. Speaking as part of a panel entitled "Notions of Womanhood," I had the chance not only to share my own findings but also to realize some of the fascinating ways that O'Brien's fictional portrayal of Irish women can tie into historical as well as contemporary discussions on Irish motherhood and womanhood. Therefore, by employing an interdisciplinary scholarly approach, there continues to be many new ways in which O'Brien's fiction can be explored not only by literary scholars but also within other academic fields such as Women's Studies, Irish Studies, History, and Cultural Studies.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that O'Brien continues to write prolifically, as is evident with the publication of her seventeenth novel, *The Light of Evening*, in 2006. Therefore, her controversial and groundbreaking writing career is far from over and her work could still take new and unexpected turns in the future. To conclude this discussion, the following excerpt from an interview with O'Brien reminds the reader of her own often challenging and painful Irish girlhood, which has been both a source of inspiration and motivation throughout her life and literary career:

Because of having had a hard upbringing, to put it mildly, I've always been rather hard on myself. And I feel that I must constantly be learning and it sounds so priggish but I don't mean it to be. So I knew I wanted to leave that village and I knew I wanted to write. ... I was wanting and I'm still trying to write things that just glisten with truth and with depth. ... Each book I write is like the rung of a ladder to the next book. (Swaim)

If each of O'Brien's powerful novels and stories is, indeed, like "the rung of a ladder to the next book," then I look forward immensely to reading and studying more of O'Brien's innovative, emotional and profound literary works to come.

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