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An Imagined Irish Girlhood:

Representations of Female Identity Formation and
Development in the Novels
of Kate O'Brien, Maura Laverty, and Edna O'Brien

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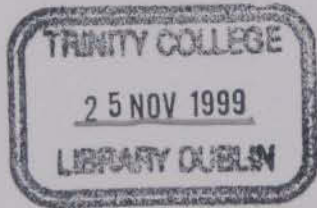
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**An Imagined Irish Girlhood: Representations of Female
Identity Formation and Development in the Novels of Kate
O'Brien, Maura Laverty, and Edna O'Brien**

Ellen R. Malenas

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy
in Anglo-Irish Literature, University of Dublin, Trinity College, 1998.



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Ellen R. Malenas
30 September 1998

Summary

This paper is an identity-based approach to representations of girlhood and female development in the work of Irish female authors of the early twentieth century. The Introduction describes the feminine ideal in Ireland at this time and explores how various women writers have responded to it. Confronted with the ideal of the "secular Irish Madonna," female authors of this period had to respond to its extremity by either subverting it gently, adopting it completely, or exposing its destructive consequences.

Because the constructs of girlhood and femininity are as much part of the real world as they are of fictional representations, the Introduction discusses this paper's utilization of studies and theories from the social sciences in an effort to bring a fresh analysis to the texts. Namely, a socioeconomic reading is used in the chapter on formal education, and psychoanalytic theory is discussed in the chapter on sexuality. The Introduction also discusses previous critical work or reviews done on each author and their relevance to this particular study.

Chapter One forms the theoretical basis for the paper. It explores the concepts of sex, gender, and femininity as social constructions, speculating as to why these constructions have become so important in maintaining social stability. This exploration forms the basis of an examination of how those forces may influence the characterization of heroines by female authors.

Chapter Two begins the detailed analysis of Kate O'Brien's *The Land of Spices* and *Mary Lavelle*, and Maura Laverty's *Never No More*. Using sociological studies to form the basis of the argument that female education is a preparation for the future appropriation of feminine roles, this chapter looks at how two authors form completely different approaches to negotiating femininity with intellectual development.

Chapter Three examines Edna O'Brien's representation of female development through the lens of sexuality. Using ideas important to psychoanalytic theory, particularly those of Jacques Lacan, this chapter shows how the idea of female sexuality as representative of lack leads to dependency on male sexual attachment for happiness and fulfillment. Caithleen's story approximates a fictional representation of this phenomenon and points out the harmful nature of this exigency.

Unlike Kate O'Brien's characters who look for their identity within themselves and their experiences, Edna O'Brien's Caithleen sees herself only in the reflection of an attachment to a man. This fundamental difference is perhaps what leads to O'Brien's characters transcending feminine roles where Edna O'Brien's are decimated by them. How these particular characters respond to the challenges of growing up female in this society shows a great deal about what the authors saw as the most difficult hurdles in negotiating feminine roles.

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Introduction

Girlhood functions as both a cultural concept and a lived reality. Representations of female development by female authors incorporate both the author's individual experience with the lived reality and its cultural counterpart-- the ideal. Irish female authors of the early twentieth century are of particular interest because they had the difficult task of incorporating the reality of girlhood with a set of extremely rigid cultural expectations in the creation of their female heroines.

Because of the influence of both the Catholic Church and Cultural Nationalism, there was an incredible amount of pressure for early twentieth century women in Ireland to conform to a certain ideal closely linked to motherhood, matrimony, and piety. For example, according to the pages of *Sinn Féin* during 1906-1907, a woman represented the grass roots vessel of Nationalism (Hywel 1991, 26). She was expected to "rule and serve" simultaneously in the home according to the wants and needs of the family and to "transmit Irishness to her children." In short, a woman's patriotism was expressed by being a good wife and mother (Hywel 1991, 29-30). The female authors examined in this paper, Kate O'Brien, Maura Laverty, and Edna O'Brien, lived under this specific cultural legacy where the good woman is synonymous with the good mother. It affected their representation of female development as the authors either attempted to circumvent or champion the ideal role.

This paper will explore how these three different authors responded to these expectations in the formation of their female characters. In Maura Laverty's case, the imagined representation of girlhood closely adheres to the cultural concept, losing its ability to create an accurate simulacrum of an individual, while gaining a powerful ability to

describe the values and expectations of the time. Kate and Edna O'Brien's representations are experiments in engaging the dominant ideology in order to subvert it or function as a counterpoint. In these novels, more focus is given to individual character's internal emotional states and cognitive development. The reader becomes almost a voyeur, observing what one possible, imagined developmental path of a girl might look like.

The act of reading the novel becomes an exercise in imagining an individual girl's development; it is a mental window created for viewing one possible prototype of female identity formation. This paper is concerned with how female authors represent their heroine's attempt to negotiate their identities under the strictures of feminine roles. How do the authors represent female maturation under the expectations of matrimony and motherhood? Do heroines attempt to escape the confines of those roles or do they easily appropriate them? What creative solutions or alternative lifestyles might these authors imagine for their heroines which enable them to live beyond the jurisdiction of those roles? What are the described results of a potential escape or resignation? Are all female authors concerned with an act of transcendence or do these authors even find a display of transcendence necessary?

The formation of an adult female identity is a massive subject area, and there are many theories both in the humanities and the sciences which attempt to describe what the process of identity formation entails and what its results should be. To attempt to look at female identity solely through using the tools of literary criticism denies all the complexity and influence of other disciplines. The reality of societal expectations heavily influences the literary representation of characters. Approaching this topic by observing the interaction of a text with theories from the social sciences adds a new element in

understanding the particular question of how female authors portray female development under the confines of feminine roles.

It is not within the scope of this investigation to examine all areas of female identity formation. Therefore, the representations of the female experience in education and sexual development have been chosen because of their fundamental role in this process. In order to elucidate these areas, the discussion of education has been paired with sociological studies of the same period. In addition, the representation of female sexual development will be analyzed using ideas important to psychoanalytic theory.

The different approaches to describing female education will be examined through Kate O'Brien's novels, *The Land of Spices* and *Mary Lavelle* and Maura Laverty's *Never No More*. The chapter on education draws on sociological studies to form the basis of the argument that formal education anticipates female's appropriation of one of three traditional roles. Kate O'Brien's novels are set in opposition to Laverty's *Never No More* in an attempt to contrast how O'Brien's heroine's negotiate and manipulate the educational system in order to transcend traditional roles, while Laverty's Delia is offered as the icon of a cultural understanding of female development.

Sexuality is the second approach used to describe the representation of identity. To aid in the understanding of Edna O'Brien's portrayal of her heroine's sexual development in *The Country Girls Trilogy*, this chapter draws on the tenants of the psychoanalytic approach. Because the psychoanalytic approach focuses much of its energy on determining how female sexuality is incomplete or a defective copy of male sexuality, this theory is used to elucidate how O'Brien creates a character whose self-worth and sanity become dependent upon her sexual attachment to a male. O'Brien's writing describes many of the assumptions of psychoanalytic theory, and it is by using that theory that Caithleen's quest

for identity through sexual union can be provocatively analyzed. This is an approach to identity that takes place through physical union and external experience, rather than intellectual or personal exploration of Kate O'Brien's heroines. The coupling of the sociological and psychoanalytic approaches with the literary one will serve to enhance existing observations on these complicated authors and perhaps raise some new questions about their works.

In his introduction to *Ordinary People Dancing*, Eibhear Walshe proposes that the limited amount of recent criticism there is on Kate O'Brien's novels is just as damaging as the previous neglect or silencing of them. "In many ways, this unqualified championing and reclaiming of O'Brien as successful proto-feminist and victorious, uncomplicated radical is as counter-productive as outright neglect" (Walshe 1993, 1). Implied in this statement is the idea that O'Brien was not the feminist writer that critics of the late twentieth century would like her to be, but that feminist critics have attempted to reformulate her into a mold which she does not easily fit. This is true. O'Brien does not lend herself to the researcher pursuing some prototypical feminist truth that need only be rediscovered in order to be recognized. Walshe's argument could not be more balanced in its approach to such a complicated author. However, Walshe's statement is not completely adhered to in the individual approaches of the various essays. For example, in Mary Breen's contribution "Something Understood?" she states that *The Land of Spices* is a "radical and subversive critique of patriarchal ideology" (Breen 1993, 167). Such a unilateral stance cannot be easily maintained, for O'Brien both subverts and supports this ideology.

Adele Dalsimer responds to this question of the alleged subversiveness of O'Brien's novels by suggesting that O'Brien looks for "an alternative to Ireland's claustrophobic society" by moving her characters to the Continent in such works as *Mary*

Lavelle. This argument seems to suggest that O'Brien creates the space for her gentle feminist subversion through removal of the heroine to a distant place. Much as the Gothic novel relied on the exotic Continental setting for the reader to suspend their disbelief in the supernatural, Dalsimer seems to be arguing that for such liberal ideas as female sexual or intellectual exploration to be believed, they cannot be described within an Irish setting. This idea of creating a subversive space is engaging, but it ignores books such as *The Land of Spices* which are actively in dialogue with the concept of "Irishness" and Irish institutions (the Church, Nationalism, the Catholic middle class) but still retain their air of insubordination. In fact, Dalsimer's analysis of *The Land of Spices* ignores its setting and opts for a comparative study with Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

This paper will attempt to explore further the ambiguity that Walshe describes. O'Brien chances taunting and irritating the dominant ideology within acceptable limits, but her dialogue always takes place within its arena. The voices of patriarchy and the maintenance of institutional hierarchy are well represented in her novels, and the feminist reader can be filled with agreement or anachronistic disappointment (and sometimes both) at all stages of the reading. O'Brien is writing from within the establishment, but her unconventionality and her intellect allow her to claw away pieces of its confines. Her novels can be imagined as constructed from the cloth of the traditional where the author functions as a discrete disintegrator of the very fabric of which the novel is made. Through her incisive characterization and dialogue, she slowly scratches away at this fabric, creating holes in the established order or traditional views. Through these punctures, the reader sees the suggestions of different roles and expectations for women. This work will attempt to concentrate on those subversive perforations and attempt to locate O'Brien's vision by

peering through them, without ignoring the fact that the very fabric that those tears are made from is that of the establishment.

One cannot examine O'Brien's undermining of the establishment without looking at what a female author's literary representation of conventional views might look like. Maura Laverty's *Never No More* will be analyzed as a possible example of this representation. Laverty's approach, unlike O'Brien's, exalts the predominant ideology of roles for women, promoting innocence, childlike dependence, and a lack of ambition as the model for the developing heroine. Although little critical work has been done on this book, reviews from notable contemporaries of Laverty's praised it as a work that showed everything good about girlhood in Ireland. In his introduction to the first edition, Sean O'Faolain gave it the highest praise for describing the an idyllic Irish life and an ideal Irish girl.

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In concert with O'Faolain, Lorna Reynolds believes the highest merit of the book is its upholding of conventional values. *Never No More* deserves commendation not for its literary merit, but:

because it shows well how important it is to a child to be born into a settled tradition, a stable civilisation, an accepted way of life, how the young creature is given security and comfort and freedom to unfold, and how so much of the enchanted happiness of childhood is due to an unquestioning acceptance of established standards (Reynolds 1942, 50).

Reynolds seems to agree with what Laverty is attempting to represent-- a conventional girlhood is a happy one. Be and aspire to be what society wants, and contentment is the reward. A heroine, and by implication in this quote, a girl, must only *accept established standards* and not try to create an individual identity in order to find fulfillment.

Some reviewers did not even grasp that Delia was presented as a character. For example in the June 1942 review in *The Bell*, *Never No More* is described as a "valuable edition to the library of modern Irish autobiographies which together give a fairly thorough

survey of Irish life" (MacManus 1942, 220). This statement shows society's eagerness to embrace the icon that Delia represents-- to believe that such a state of innocence is not only imaginable, but real. Ignoring sentimentality, this paper will attempt to show *Never No More* as a time capsule of the ideal of girlhood of 1940's Ireland.

From these reviews, it is apparent that there was a certain sentimentalization or mythologization of the innocence and inherent goodness of the fresh-faced, rural Irish girl. When Edna O'Brien explodes this fantasy with an explicit portrayal of a country girl's sexual development, the reader is confronted with a disturbing portrayal of an idealized feminine trait-- emotional dependence. No longer a quaint badge of innocence and femininity, dependence becomes the destructive force of emotional ruin both for the heroine and those around her. Caithleen shows us what Delia would have become without the unconditional and undying love of Gran. Challenging the myth that dependence is an admirable female trait created a negative response to O'Brien's work.

When this novel, *Girls in their Married Bliss* (Cape, London, 1964), arrived, it proved to be so different from the first two books that readers were startled. The two girls, the heroines of these books, now married, had lost their girlish laughter. The book's title was seen to be so bitterly ironic and the London life of Cáit and Baba was sordid. . . . Miss O'Brien seemed in places to be writing a kind of neo-feminist propaganda (McMahon 1967, 79).

O'Brien commits a cultural sin by not giving the reader the laughing, chaste Colleen and is severely censured for it. Instead of dependence being sweet and endearing, as it is with Delia, it unravels the family structure, rather than preserving it. O'Brien's violation of this cultural contract is seen as an assertion of feminism, even though her heroines are extremely vulnerable and strongly identify with the values of a patriarchal society, including dependence.

In her book, *Edna O'Brien*, Grace Eckley describes the effect of Caithleen's desperate attempt to find love and how dependence on a man for identity, becomes an exercise in self-immolation:

Still a second factor exposed by Miss O'Brien's literary stethoscope should cause more discomfort than this exclusive submergence in the love theme, and that is the thoroughness with which one's choice of someone to love defines the entire range of one's personality; it exposes a streak of masochism, describes one's pathetic ideals, or reflects conditions of loneliness (Eckley 1974, 11).

However, Eckley approaches O'Brien's text as an exploration of different kinds of love. This paper is concerned with the disproportionate importance that romantic or sexual love is given ⁱⁿ Caithleen's life. Her identity and self-worth are completely dependent upon the sexual attention and affection of a man to the exclusion of every other kind of love relationship. What the role of sexual love is that makes it the definitive factor in the psychological success of O'Brien's character is a question that remains unanswered.

Edna O'Brien's Caithleen shows how a character's internal state, her need for love, coupled with a societal belief, that women only have identity in relation to males, is a lethal combination. Caithleen is a representation of one girl's unsuccessful attempt to negotiate feminine roles. Edna O'Brien does not foresee escape for her characters, where Kate O'Brien does. Perhaps because Kate O'Brien's characters rarely attempt long term attachments with men, this is possible. She creates an imaginative space where women can transcend conscription into matrimony or motherhood-- earning scholarships, taking lovers, and triumphing where heroines of the past have been destroyed. Conversely, Laverty presents the slave who whistles while she works. She does not foresee any other possibility than her heroine approximating the cultural ideal. Unaware that there is any other kind of life, Delia skips through the minefield of patriarchy.

Examining these representations, which emanate from completely different perspectives and with contrasting motivations, uncovers the dynamic interaction between social pressure and an individual authors ideas about what female development may entail within a fictional context. The first chapter will begin this examination by looking into how the social pressure to appropriate the feminine asserts itself and why it is necessary to societal stability. By clearly defining that pressure, it will become increasingly apparent how Kate O'Brien, Maura Laverty, and Edna O'Brien's heroines are formed in response or submission to it.

1

Gender is Destiny: The Social Construct of Girlhood and Its Implications for Female Development

The concepts of sex and gender are seminal to the organization of western culture. Announcing an infant's gender is one of the first categorizations made concerning any human life. From that initial moment, our gender-conscious society dictates how the individual will be perceived and what will be expected of them based on the distinction of male or female. Those with male morphology are born "boys" who will eventually become "men." Those with female morphology are "girls" and one day will become "women." The fact that those attending the birth say, "It's a girl," rather than "It's a female" before the infant has any opportunity to display gendered behaviors emphasizes the fundamental nature of society's expectation that physical sex will lead to a corresponding identity and gender appropriate behaviors.

The idea that one's biology should dictate behavior under a prescribed set of gender roles has long been criticized, and the theory that gender is a socially constructed phenomenon has its roots in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Simone de Beauvoir deflates the idea that woman is a womb who thinks with her glands and who represents sex and nothing more in male society. Rather, she proves how making women and femininity the representatives of the Other served an important function in bourgeois society (de Beauvoir 1949, xlvii).

Now, what peculiarly signalizes the situation of woman is that she-- a free and autonomous being like all human creatures-- nevertheless finds herself in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other. . . . The drama of woman lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego)-- who always regard the self as the essential-- and the compulsions of a situation in which she is the inessential (de Beauvoir 1949, liv).

Femininity defined as the inessential is the propaganda of society and not the dictate of biological destiny. This assumption is a prerequisite for following her argument. However, the question it asks, which will be returned to later with regard to female development, is how a female, as a human being filled with the same desire to be the subject as a male, can find fulfillment when she has been relegated to the position of the Other. What difficult internal negotiations must occur for a female to find an identity when she has been assigned the role of the compliment?

Simone de Beauvoir's ideas have been incredibly influential in creating a distinction between biological sex and its cultural expression-- gender. It is on the basis of this distinction that she makes her case that females no longer be treated as inferior. Implicit in this idea is that the two are separate and that sex does not necessarily dictate one's behavior or identity. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler confronts the logic of the argument that sex is biology and gender is culture. She argues that if the two are discrete phenomena, then gender should have multiple manifestations and not simply be limited to the distinctions of either masculine and feminine as dictated by the binary categorizations of sex.

If gender is the cultural meaning that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from sex in any one way. Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders. Assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of "men" will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that "women" will interpret only female bodies. . . . The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one (Butler 1990, 6).

Using Butler's logic, it becomes clear that biological sex in no way should signify the development of any particular gender-- masculine or feminine. What is problematic about

this passage is that it indicates that a female could take on masculine attributes and vice versa, but it does not elaborate on non-binary manifestations of gender. It does not describe what a "free-floating artifice," a gender that is neither masculine nor feminine, would entail. It remains a challenge to conceptualize a gender continuum, independent of a binary system, because the constructs of our culture are so dependent upon these categories. As part of this challenge, Butler reminds the reader that individuals exist who have both male and female attributes on different biological levels, defying sexual categorization and subverting the cultural and scientific classifications of sex¹.

Butler speculates on why these binary categorizations of male and female have become so entrenched in the fabric of western society. She contends that these categorizations are vital to promoting and enforcing heterosexuality as the normative state of behavior.

The heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between "feminine" and "masculine," where these are understood as expressive attributes of "male" and "female." The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of "identities" cannot "exist"-- that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not "follow" from either sex or gender (Butler 1990, 17).

The loss of these categorizations would completely destabilize compulsory heterosexuality and the institutions based upon it-- patriarchy, marriage, paternity, the family. One must be clear what one's sex is in order to seek out the opposite to engage in sexual behavior. A cultural faith in the validity of the classification system of sex is imperative to maintaining institutional order. As discussed in the introduction, in Ireland, the institutions of motherhood and matrimony took on almost a religious importance as part of the building of the ideology of a nation. The success of those institutions, and to some extent the Irish

¹For a thought-provoking illustration of the ambiguity of sex difference please see Lynda Birke's essay, "In Pursuit of Difference: Scientific Studies of Women and Men" in *Inventing Women*.

state itself, hinged on the feminine, the masculine, and their eventual coupling being categorically unquestioned.

More importantly, there was no mindset or learned understanding of any categories beyond those of male and female. Butler refers to this lack of understanding beyond the binary as a "cultural intelligibility" which denies the existence of anyone who falls outside of its mass understanding. An example of this can be found in O'Brien's *The Land of Spices* being banned for one short line that indicated homosexual love. O'Brien's lesbianism was not even acknowledged or openly discussed until recently (Donoghue 1993, 36). The person who falls outside of categorization is denied the possibility of recognized existence not only because they threaten the maintenance of the power structure, but also because no place has been made within our cultural system for classifying and acknowledging their existence.

If both sex and gender are cultural constructions, it becomes critical to define what their relationship is to one another and which one influences or determines the other. Butler argues that our conceptualization of gender makes binary sex classifications possible and validates them.

Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/ cultural means by which "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive," prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts (Butler 1990, 7).

Thus, it is really gender, our way of classifying and perceiving ourselves, that determines how we conceptualize biological sex. The gender constructs of masculine and feminine form our binary conceptualization of biological sex. Biological sex is then used to validate gender under the guise of "science" and "fact." The two concepts reinforce each other and simultaneously construct the ideological foundations upon which each rests.

If both sex and gender are carefully constructed ideological states which serve to support the institutions of a patriarchal culture, great effort must be invested in ensuring that males become boys and men and that females become girls and women. In order for this to happen, gender must be appropriated by the individuals in order to achieve the final status of a gendered adult. But what are the requirements of gender? What is gender itself?

In her essay "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," Butler defines the parameters, limitations, and ultimately the "nature" of the construct of gender. She maintains that gender is both itself an imitation and a status that can only be achieved through constant approximation to that imitation. Only through repetition of the "drag" of femininity or masculinity can one maintain gender status. If one's behavior changes, ceases to be "gender appropriate," then one essentially loses one's gender status. Butler states, "[t]here is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler 1990, 25). Each gender-specific action that an individual performs serves to reconfirm their status as either masculine or feminine.

However, this status must be constantly reconfirmed precisely because it is only an imitation-- a thing that exists only in the performance of it, not in of itself. Butler shows how those who use gender's most performative aspects, the "drag" of femininity or masculinity, to subvert the male equals masculine, female equals feminine paradigm, cause society to question what it is that actually constitutes man or woman. If gender is a performance or costume, it can easily be changed or modified, and as such, is not a fixed phenomenon or a cultural expression of sex.

Because of the precarious nature, the very fluidity of gender, boys and girls must be convinced that their corresponding adult titles of man and woman are attractive and that

the status they denote is desirable or worth achieving. If masculine attributes are the ones which are revered in society, it is a difficult task to supply the motivation for a female to want to appropriate femininity. What mechanisms will be used to seduce girls into adopting what is deemed the "less desirable" of genders? What will the threats and inducements be to lure girls into choosing the attributes of femininity over masculinity or androgyny? This type of manipulation will become central to the crisis in *The Land of Spices*, where Anna Murphy struggles with her desire for autonomy (a masculine prerogative) when categorically, because of her female sex, she should be striving for a completely different goal: self-effacement.

The carrot and the stick must be thoroughly seductive, threatening, and come from a variety of sources of influence to achieve their goal². In the face of this cultural pressure, the female is armed only with her own private belief in herself-as-subject in order to contend with the dissemination of gender socialization. Girlhood becomes a crucial period because it is the time when gender appropriate behaviors as they relate to sexuality begin to become expressed. More than any previous time, it becomes imperative that little girls begin to act like little women and start taking interests in boys and men so that the institutions of heterosexuality are maintained.

In her essay, "Femininity and Adolescence," Barbara Hudson discusses the difficult negotiation process that adolescent females engage in when they attempt to both mature and take on a gender role that is predicated upon dependence. She maintains that

²For a contemporary discussion of how popular culture influences female development, please see Angela McRobbie's *Feminism and Youth Culture*. In this work, McRobbie discusses how popular girls' magazines anticipate what the desires of a girl should be based on what it is possible for her to become in a given society and preempt her own personal desires if they deviate from the anticipated ones. Prefiguring their roles as wives and mothers, success for adolescent girls is determined by their ability to secure romantic attachments to males. McRobbie found that all other relationships or interests were either ignored or represented as unimportant by these magazines.

the concepts of femininity and adolescence are "subversive" to one another. Adolescence is essentially a masculine identified state, concerned with rebellion, exploration, and independence. Because girls are not socialized to be rebellious or independent, the female adolescent is put in a problematic position of creating an adult identity without overtly expressing attributes of independence. Simone de Beauvoir expresses the same idea in *The Second Sex*.

But for the young woman, on the contrary, there is a contradiction between her status as a real human being and her vocation as a female. And just here is to be found the reason why adolescence is for a woman so difficult and decisive a moment. Up to this time she has been an autonomous individual: now she must renounce her sovereignty (de Beauvoir 1949, 353).

In achieving adolescent femininity, the girl must accept giving up her ego, taking the role of the Other, and becoming sexually passive. Especially interesting in Hudson's research was the idea espoused by teachers and guidance counselors that a girl's exploration of sexuality should not be enjoyed for its own sake, but only as an adjunct to "forming caring relationships" with males (Hudson 1984, 47). Edna O'Brien's *Caithleen* will be representative of this narrow ideology. She is only motivated to express her sexuality as a symbol of romantic attachment, rather than as a pursuit of her own pleasure. This predicament of being sexual, not for oneself, but only in a relational way, typifies the expectations of girlhood. It is an impossible situation where the girl is supposed to explore independence and identity but only within narrow confines. She must be content with these confines, or she is threatened with the loss of the label of "feminine."

Conserving the category of the feminine is extremely important in maintaining a social hierarchy which serves the needs of a patriarchal culture. Females are socialized from an early age to appropriate certain attributes to achieve the label "feminine" in order to be acceptable in a succession of roles which are deemed desirable, principally the wife and

mother. Both formal and informal education encourage this appropriation. In Ireland of the early twentieth century, there was a great amount of pressure from both the Nationalist movement and the Church for girls to take on these roles. The ideas discussed here-- the construct of girlhood, what its social function is, and what its possible effect on individual girls may be-- will form the basis of the discussion of education and sexuality in the following chapters. In Kate O'Brien, Maura Laverty, and Edna O'Brien's novels, the reader will see the texts interacting with the construction of girlhood by either responding, refuting, or championing it through a fictional representation of female identity formation and development.

2

Creative Subversions: Education and the Novels of Kate O'Brien and Maura Laverty

During the first half of the twentieth century in Ireland, education fostered and predicted one of three eventualities for women. The possible roles that the average female could be prepared for were wife and mother, nun, or remaining single and engaging in some type of socially sanctioned vocation such as being a secretary, primary school teacher, or nurse. Women's formal education, both in the curriculum and the length of study, anticipated and prepared females for the roles appropriate to their sex and class. Female education was shaped by economic and social needs, rather than on the individual intellectual or creative skills of the girls involved. Marriage, as a choice that requires the least amount of educational investment but fulfills an important social necessity, was always construed as the most desirable of these options.

In the chapter entitled "Schooling and the achievement of a sexed identity" in her book, *The Modern Girl*, Lesley Johnson illustrates how education encourages and anticipates female's appropriation of the roles of wife and mother. Her research examines the effects of an institutionalized domestic education on girls in Australia during the 1950's. During this time, nationally funded schools systematically encouraged women to become wives and mothers by making classes in domestic skills a requirement (Johnson 1993, 81). Through systematic domestic education, girls were encouraged to take on a shared identity where femininity became an achievement and a badge of the modern (Johnson 1993, 78). Learning to use household appliances or plan a balanced meal allowed a girl to "make herself" in the feminine form and achieve the status of her gender. These skills were

assumed to be used for the girls to enhance both their appearance and behavior under the dictates of femininity³ (Johnson 1993, 79). Curiously, the proponents of these arguments did not see the faulty logic of their compulsory attempt at feminine socialization. If wife and mother are the "natural" roles a female should appropriate, as has long been argued (Foley 1997, 27), why must education in these roles become compulsory and femininity be deemed an "achievement"? What this type of domestic education actually did achieve was to serve a post-war societal necessity of creating the female "housewife" as the model consumer. It fulfilled a social and economic necessity, rather than an educational need of the girls.

Educating a child requires substantial economic resources. In addition, a further burden is placed on the family because while that child is being educated, he or she is unable to contribute to the family's resources by working. Because of the financial strain extended education places on the family, its purpose is usually confined to preparing a child for a future adult role where some economic or social necessity will be fulfilled. Traditionally, only the extremely economically privileged have been able to justify education for education's sake. Girls in particular had to justify the "squandering" of economic resources on their education, because the roles that were predetermined for them did not have an intellectual life as a necessary prerequisite.

In Kate O'Brien's *The Land of Spices* and Mary Lavelle and Maura Laverty's *Never No More*, the relationship between education and the appropriation of feminine roles is explored. Kate O'Brien's heroines are concerned with negotiating feminine roles and their thoughts and actions are often subversive to the accepted norms of girlhood. Maura

³Johnson's example of this trend is seen in an excerpt from an Australian newspaper covering a fashion show put on by a Home Science secondary school. The dresses which all the girls were required to sew, when donned, were supposed to remove their schoolgirlishness and cloak them in a newfound air of managed femininity (Johnson 1993, 98).

Laverty's narrative is more an enunciation or description of the ideal of girlhood. She creates a character in celebration of the very impossible ideal O'Brien's heroines struggle against. Much of this struggle and negotiation occurs during the educational experiences of adolescence, where the heroines come into conflict with expectations for the first time.

Anna Murphy and the Quest for Intellectual Identity

Published in 1941, Kate O'Brien's novel *The Land of Spices* was banned in the Republic of Ireland for a one line reference to a homosexual embrace. This decision by the censorship board to ignore all of the other contents of the novel on the objectionableness of one phrase seems highly reactionary. However, when the theme of the book is examined closely, the search for an identity outside of the traditional feminine role, one wonders whether it was this theme, not the sex scene, which made the book threatening. It is much easier to object vociferously to a one line sex scene than it is to a socially subversive theme. Through the progression of the novel, the reader observes Anna Murphy striving to create a future for herself that transcends traditional feminine roles. Educated in an all female environment, a convent that is outside the jurisdiction of the male church, Anna dares to dream of a future that involves self-fulfillment through intellectual exploration, rather than through marriage.

In the novel, there are many different voices engaged in a dialogue discussing what should be the aim of female education. The nuns, the Bishop, the girls' parents, and the girls themselves all have a different objective for their education. Often, the future a girl wants for herself is in conflict with what society has deemed the objective of her education to be. At the center of the conflict is how resources should be disposed of to the best

advantage of the girl and her family. These resources are not just tangible ones like money. They also include the girl's beauty, "marriagability," and her level of intelligence.

Foreshadowing Anna's eventual struggle to break free of these prescribed roles, the book begins with an illustration of the central conflict over the aim of female education-- between a girl's personal aspirations and the expectations of society. Eileen O'Doherty is a prime example of a girl who violates societal expectation in pursuit of personal aspiration. She chooses to take the veil instead of seeking a marital alliance, even though she is beautiful, extremely feminine, and well admired by masculine society.

Because marriage is construed as the most desirable option and Eileen foregoes this "privilege", there is much speculation as to her motivation. Even the nuns themselves are curiously suspicious of Eileen's choice of vocation.

As Reverend Mother stood in outward composure . . . a reflection of dry pity escaped across her prayers. "She had to come back to this-- I wonder why? I wonder why she has refused the sunny, ordinary life her face was made for? But after all, she'll find it here. Plenty of sunny ordinariness" (O'Brien 1941, 4).

The suspicion stems from the belief that marriage is the most attractive choice for a woman and the successful culmination of her education. It is particularly shocking when a girl who had excellent prospects for marriage chooses the veil. She is "pitied." The choice is viewed as a waste of youth and beauty.

Criticism of Eileen's choice is not just of a waste of gaiety and youth. It is also a less advantageous economic choice. For a beautiful girl of large fortune and good family, marriage is seen as the best disposal of her education. Eileen is perceived as squandering the resources invested in her education because a good alliance would have increased family wealth and connections. Instead, her fortune accompanies her to the order, both decreasing the family's collective resources and precluding the possibility of bringing in new wealth from a marital union.

A foil to Eileen O'Doherty is offered in *Mère Martine*. Because she is deformed, she is deemed unattractive and unmarriagable. "She was a lazy old nun, a bundle of shawls, with an unusually beautiful, merry face and a deformed left foot, the result of an accident in girlhood, and the probable reason why anyone so naturally pleasure-loving had entered religion" (O'Brien 1941, 87). *Mère Martine* fits the stereotype of a nun as someone who was not wanted by anyone. Her choice of a vocation seems suitable to the resources available to her-- she was most likely not going to be married and becoming a nun allows her to remain financially independent and secure. This deformity is assumed to be the reason for vocation, rather than a love of God.

However, the reader never is fully aware of what the actual reason for both women's choice was. The fact that the community's speculations are observed by the reader creates a kind of societal dialogue discussing the different educational paths that lead to becoming a nun. *Mère Martine's* choice is conventional and predictable. It is in concert with stereotypes of nuns. Eileen O'Doherty's is surprising and arouses curiosity. It undermines stereotype.

With all of these forces in opposition, Eileen's choice prepares the reader for thinking that marriage is perhaps not the most desirable alternative and that other options can provide happiness and fulfillment. This doubt is further encouraged by O'Brien's portrayal of the failure of the two marriages experienced in the novel-- that of Anna Murphy and Helen Archer's parents. It is made clear that Anna is sent away to school early because her father is a verbally abusive alcoholic in constant conflict with his wife. Anna's mother, who used to be "gay and pretty," becomes visibly broken by the unsuitable match. A different kind of martyr, Helen Archer's mother is content to die young because she will never be fulfilled in her marriage.

She lives out her life in chastity and unrequited love, seemingly unable to have a fulfilling life in work, friends, or her child. It is no surprise then that her daughter, Helen, chooses a life of chastity where she at minimum has professional and intellectual fulfillment. With this in mind, Eileen O'Doherty's choice seems to be a sound one and not as shocking as society feigns it to be.

The pattern of offering both conventional and progressive opinions on the purposes and results of female education continues throughout the novel. Ambivalence toward maintaining tradition and encouraging girls to exploit individual talents is seen within the inconsistent and conflicting views and actions of the educators themselves. Father Conroy is a perfect example of a spiritual educator who espouses convention in reference to generalities but treats individual female students with a more progressive attitude. When he speaks of the general goal of a *Sainte Famille* education, he declares it to be a preparation for an upper class marriage market.

"Somehow it's a bit of a pity, it seems to me, Reverend Mother, to be training Irish girls as suitable wives for English Majors and Colonial Governors!"

He spoke angrily because he was afraid of his own audacity.

"We educate our children in the Christian virtues and graces. If these appeal to English majors, why, so much the better for those gentlemen!"

"Our young girls must be educated *nationally* now, Reverend Mother-- to be the wives of *Irishmen* and to meet the changing times!" (O'Brien 1941, 92).

Whether or not marriage should be the culmination of education is never given a thought. Citing the lack of Irish language in the continental based curriculum of *Sainte Famille*, the education is only evaluated on what nationality of husband it suits-- British or Irish.

However, Father Conroy is capable of conceiving other possibilities for disposing of the talents of women. Not merely a blustering patriarch, he outlines the possibilities for a woman's future to Anna with respect, open-mindedness, and sensitivity.

But when you are grown up, left school, you will perhaps decide to be a nun and live entirely for the glory of God; or you may decide to live alone in the world, devoting yourself to work or study of some kind; *or*, very likely, you will feel that you do not want to live always alone, that you would like a husband and children (O'Brien 1941, 95).

Here, it is evident that he sees that different options are available for women and that they can make a contribution through work or study, not simply by being wives.

O'Brien's choice to display two seemingly contradictory opinions in Father Conroy is important because it shows that even the male educators are concerned with the appropriate allocation of resources in the female education. Marriage is not mandatory provided that a girl has the skills, opportunity, and resources to devote herself to some other pursuit. The Bishop's attitude toward Anna's academic talent is a prime example of the conflicting attitude.

He liked intellectual competence and he liked Anna Murphy; he was a vigorous supporter of the National University and always eager that the scholarships awarded by his county should fall to worthy candidates; and he believed in education-- up to a point, or when they seemed worth it-- of women. He said that, when they had brains, which was seldom, these tended to be fresher and more independent than the brains of men (O'Brien 1941, 251).

There appears to be one confining rule for the general masses with the possibility of exceptions made for girls who prove themselves to be beyond the ordinary. The men are not necessarily against the girls advancing in education, but merely they hope that education comes to some type of productive result. The dark side of this seemingly progressive approach is that often girls are the last in line for opportunities and resources to pursue their interests. Compulsory marriage then becomes the only option.

The attitude of the male clergy is echoed in the nuns. Although more closely interested in the personal development of the girls, the nuns do not discourage the idea that the *Sainte Famille* education is a preparation for marriage. In fact, this preparation is part of the curriculum. The traditions of *la pudeur et la politesse* are in keeping with the

convention of preparing girls to be upper class wives. Throughout the novel, special attention is given to the girls' deportment, dress, behavior, and social skills. This is unremarkable in the all-female environment of the convent. Its purpose seems to be to create attractive social harmony. However, with the introduction of male company, it becomes apparent that these skills are only being practiced on female classmates. Their true purpose is for socializing with men and eventually taking on the role of the wife/entertainer.

When "A Chreidheamh Athara" had at last been sung, the girls advanced, looking orderly and civilised again in their black dresses and bright sashes, to shake hands with Father Quinn and the Lord Abbot, and thereafter to "mingle with their guests," according to the counsels of Reverend Mother's Politeness Lesson. That was one of the occasions when a public display of "*la pudeur et la politesse*" was called for, if not always perfectly produced. The older girls were expected to try themselves out as hostesses, to make conversation, to look after the shy and the silent and tactfully to assist the move from the *salle* to the refectory for supper (O'Brien 1941, 183).

Although the priests are obviously not suitable mates, it is clear that the girls are supposed to practice socializing with men and being "hostesses" in preparation for the time that they will be responsible for managing their husband's social engagements. They are learning the art of nurturing the less socially adept, making others feel comfortable and appreciated--skills that will be important during the courting process. This type of education takes place outside of the classroom. It is not part of the "formal" education of the girls. The very informality of it makes it somewhat more undermining, because it shows that the girls are not just learning information, they are being molded and socialized into an ascribed set of values. That this is done during free time and under the rubric of amusement, makes it impossible for the girls to rebel against.

The nuns maintain the traditional, but they are also concerned with the development of the individual. The fiery appeal by Father Conroy for a more Nationalistic approach to

education is revisited later in the novel where it becomes clear that some part of the curriculum has been modified to include an appreciation of Irish language and culture. Although she makes the change, Reverend Mother shows that her true interest in educating the girls is to make them into respectable adults, rather than simply to get them married.

It could not so glibly be said now that *Sainte Famille* trained its girls to be the wives of British majors and colonial governors; for at least there was a choice of cultures offered to them. . . . Reverend Mother still regarded that as a local incident, and not as the mission of her Order. She still held out as strongly as ever for the European and polite tradition initiated one hundred and fifty years ago at Rouen-- indifferent and alike to the future needs of the Gaelic Leaguer or British officer. She still thought it necessary to train girls, for their own sakes and for the glory of God, to be Christians and to be civilized (O'Brien 1941, 168).

This passage is very important because it espouses the given ideology-- that these girls are being groomed to become prominent wives. Yet at the end, it quietly presents the idea that a girl deserves education for her own personal development. The Reverend Mother does not dismiss the idea that a good education makes for a better wife. She simply relegates this idea to the one that a good education makes for a moral and intelligent woman. This attitude will become critical to ensuring the academic success of Anna as she comes in conflict with her family about the suitability of her continued education.

From an early age, Anna is quite aware of what the different conventional options are for a woman of her class and education. At twelve she is playing "Nun, Married, Old Maid" with a holly leaf (O'Brien 1941, 118). However, through this character, O'Brien gives us a socially subversive portrayal of girlhood aspirations. Knowing what her options are, Anna clambers to creatively circumvent them. Echoing Father Conroy's suggestion that a woman could devote herself to study or work, Anna desires to attend university in order to explore her own identity before making a life's choice.

This desire to know more about herself and to use that knowledge to forge a path transcendent of societal categorizations is evident in Anna's early adolescence. When a

woman that Anna admires, a suffragette, asks her what she would like to be one day, the reader is invited to explore the mind of a girl with aspirations beyond the ascribed roles of nun, married, old maid. In her fantasies she imagines herself in daring and stereotypically masculine professions of "humble and handsome Canadian mountie", soldier, "patriot," a leader of expeditions to Antarctica or of "brave fishermen" (O'Brien 1941, 207).

Dismissing all of these ambitions, she is realistically left with only her triumvirate of choices.

But underneath these foolish self-dramatizations she was both cunning and realistic. . . . What you had to do was to play for time. You wanted none of the lives you saw about you, and at present saw no way to any other. But the thing was to keep your head, to be still and watchful, and walk into no traps. The thing was to have patience, and to build a high fence about the precious distant freehold, your own future, which you could as yet neither see nor attempt to describe. And meantime, though it would come to be a fact, how unreal it was, how it melted, dissolved and darkened, just as dreams did when you tried to hold them (O'Brien 1941, 208).

Yet, in this passage it becomes clear that she already sees the choke hold of expectation approaching her. There is a frantic desire for more time to find a creative solution to her crisis-- to become what she earnestly wants to be, rather than a societal default. To explore the problem of identity, Anna requires time.

As shrewd as she is, Anna realizes that time is a luxury, dependent upon economic independence. Because of her family situation, financial resources are strained, and she instinctively knows that if she does not carve her own future out of the darkness and provide her own economic support, she will be left only with the circumscribed choices.

Recently Anna was becoming nervous about the shape her personal life might take, or have forced upon it. For, side by side, with her reluctant realisation that the family was going downhill, began to stir an uneasy understanding that liberty-- she hardly knew for what, but just liberty, the general principle-- might be an expensive thing (O'Brien 1941, 197) .

What is most interesting about this passage is that soon after this reflection, Anna realizes that liberty is much more "expensive" for a girl than it is for a boy.

However, she had no grudge against her eldest brother. Merely she was learning from his case that liberty to pursue life can be withheld or made difficult-- and, from observation of Granny and talk with Miss Robertson, she saw now that whereas a boy and an eldest son may expect or command the sacrifices and co-operation of others to his ends, a girl can do no such thing. And that in fact if a girl sees liberty as the greatest of all desirables, she will have to spin it out of herself, as the spider its web-- her self-made snare in which to catch Anna did not yet know what (O'Brien 1941, 197-199).

Anna realizes that she will receive neither familial nor societal support for her quest of an intellectual identity. Because of these constraints, she becomes ambitious and hard-working, winning a scholarship which makes it possible for her to continue her education without the support a male would generally receive. In effect, she does spin her own snare out of herself in order to achieve the goal her will has set before her.

Individuality, intellectual freedom, and rebellion are concepts strongly linked with male not female adolescence. Like the ideas expressed by Simone de Beauvoir and Barbara Hudson in Chapter One, the individuation process of adolescence is incompatible with the ideals of femininity. This idea can be extended to claim that the aim of female education is incompatible with forging an individual identity. The aim of Anna's convent education is to teach her to be polite, an intelligent conversationalist, and a pious and obedient girl who is cognizant of the value of tradition. This attitude is clearly displayed in Anna's grandmother. Upon realizing how intelligent Anna is, the grandmother states, "However, in this case, I can't help wishing that the brains hadn't skipped poor Tom, and descended to Anna. After all, they are wasted on a girl" (O'Brien 1941, 196). The expectation is that Anna will do nothing productive with her academic talents and that if she was less intelligent, she would assimilate better into her expected future. When Anna violates these educational expectations and seeks independent means of continuing her quest for identity, this incites the major crisis of the book-- the clash between the adolescent girl's dreams or ambitions and societal and familial expectations.

It is only due to the semi-enlightened opinions of the powerful Bishop and the intense advocacy of Reverend Mother that Anna is allowed to provide for her own destiny. To convince the patriarchally identified Grandmother that Anna deserves to make use of the opportunities she has created for herself, the Reverend Mother must invoke the good opinion of a man. Whether or not Anna is able to continue with her education is a matter of her family believing in her potential to do something worthwhile with it.

The grandmother, unbelieving in Anna's potential, makes it clear that she thinks Anna would be unable to justify foregoing a financial contribution to the family, through her earnings at the bank, to attend university. Essentially, the grandmother wants Anna to relinquish her chance at further education because the father has drunkenly squandered the family's fortune. She does not believe Anna could do as well as her brother, even though Anna has surpassed Harry's accomplishments at the same age. When Reverend Mother brings this to her attention, Mrs. Condon quips:

That doesn't interest me. I disapprove of money wasted on the academic education of girls. . . . I wish Anna to stay near at hand and also to become of practical usefulness. To earn money, Reverend Mother. A very great deal has been spent on her. I am now going to arrange for her to be able to show that my generosity has not been wasted (O'Brien 1941, 256).

The fact that Reverend Mother strongly believes in Anna's ability to succeed is disregarded and unvalued by Mrs. Condon. Instead it takes the approval of a man to convince her of Anna's worthiness. When Reverend Mother tells Mrs. Condon that "he [the Bishop] does believe in wasting money on the academic education of women" and that "he thinks very well of her [Anna's] general work," Mrs. Condon's attitude changes to one of interest and encouragement for Anna's academic future (O'Brien 1941, 262). All it takes for Anna to extricate herself from doom is Reverend Mother's skillful manipulation of a male recommendation. Based on that recommendation, Mrs. Condon now believes that Anna's

potential role could be greater than the conventional ones, thus her extraordinary education is economically and socially justifiable.

A Break with the Body: Violation of Taboo as an Escape from Societal Expectation

Kate O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle* moves its heroine outside of an Irish setting and to the exotic-- O'Brien's much loved Spain. Also concerned with identity formation, *Mary Lavelle* precedes the cold intellectualism of *The Land of Spices* with a heroine who violently breaks free of feminine confines through physical passion. Mary Lavelle is looking for some kind of identity that is beyond the married, nun, old maid triumvirate, but unlike Anna, she does not possess a strong academic ambition from an early age. However, her educational path is still dictated by the likelihood of her fulfilling one of those roles. Because she is beautiful and marriageable, the idea of spending her own money on her further education is deemed wasteful.

Mary had, or her father had in keeping for her, one hundred pounds of her own, bequeathed to her by her godmother, and though she repeatedly asked with diffidence for possession of this, her father withheld it, "against a rainy day," he said. Nor would he hear of it being expended on training for any form of employment. "Absolute waste," he said, "unless a girl is downright plain" (O'Brien 1936, 26).

Further education is only useful for those who will be forced into the least desirable option of becoming "old maids" who must provide for themselves.

However, Mary is given permission by her father to support herself on a traveling abroad experience. Her breaking away from her family for a year is tolerated under the reasoning that it will make her a more suitable wife. She makes this rationalization herself in her first letter to her fiancé, John: "I know you think me rather a fool-- so perhaps foreign life-- you could hardly call it foreign travel-- will improve my mind for you. Dearest, I hope it will. You are so good and brainy" (O'Brien 1936, 10). This address

appears almost sickeningly self-effacing and meek. However, O'Brien uses it as a first indication to the reader of Mary's wiliness. Spain is an escape for her, not an experience intended to enrich her upcoming marriage. Contradiction to her letters is revealed in her private thoughts. What appears to be diffidence is merely an appeasement so that she may have the freedom she desires. So entrenched in the expectation of marriage, she does not even realize these are lies until she is compelled to dramatically act against them.

As in *The Land of Spices*, marriage, although socially is the most attractive option, is not portrayed favorably. Mary dreads the idea of spending a lifetime as John's wife. Although the reader is told that he is attractive and prosperous, Mary's sentiments toward both his romantic affection and his sexual advances are described as "orthodox" (O'Brien 1936, 13 and 31). She feels no passion or excitement at the prospect of a union with him and is suffocated by it. After a visit to the Prado, she reflects:

And going home she held her mood delicately, unwilling to lose her dim, shy perception of life as the artist apprehends it. But as the lift carried her up to Dona Cristina's apartment she thought of Mellick and that in a year or so she would be married and settled there-- and her eyes filled with tears (O'Brien 1936, 228).

Seeing something of the world makes her a less suitable, rather than more suitable wife. Instead of quenching her desire for freedom, her temporary independence only makes her desire it more.

The impetus for her desire for freedom comes from her memories of girlhood, before puberty, when she had the freedom to dream of a future that was not stamped with marriage. Echoing Anna's sentiments, she longs for adventure and freedom, but of a different kind. Unlike Anna, she does not view liberty as linked with a particularly masculine career. For Mary, these ideas are more amorphous and abstract, consistent with her "mooning" character.

As a child, reading the same books as Jimmy and Donal, she had dreamt as perhaps they had, on the breakfast-room window-seat, until her heart was near bursting with her own desire, her intention, to go everywhere one day, know everything, try everything, be committed to nothing. She would wander always, be a free lance always, belong to no one place or family or person. That, curiously enough, had been the only unshifting principle in a for ever changing tissue of dreams, of which now she could remember little else. And that one clue surprised her. . . . She had asked John recently if he thought it odd that a little girl should have had that notion of perpetual self-government-- indeed it was only in recollecting her former self to please her lord that she actively realised this dominant intention of her childhood. John had smiled. "Do you think my having been so-- so sure of myself then is likely to make me a bad wife?" she persisted (O'Brien 1936, 27).

Instinctively, Mary realizes that independence and individuality are incompatible with taking on the role of wife. Her outward attempt at being feminine and meek, "recollecting her former self to please her lord," incites the hidden passions of her childhood dreams that still remain within her. Mary seems to equate giving up dreams of freedom with the putting away of childish things. In her letters, she appears quite prepared to do this, but in her actions and her solitary reflections it becomes clear that these desires will continue to haunt her in early adulthood and spur her towards escaping to Spain.

To go to Spain. To be alone for a little space, a tiny hiatus between her life's two accepted phases. To cease being a daughter without immediately becoming a wife. To be free lance, to belong to no one place or family or person-- to achieve the silly longing of childhood, only for one year, before she flung it with all other childish things upon the scrapheap (O'Brien 1936, 34).

Her goal is to live outside of the predictable feminine roles of daughter and wife for one year. Interestingly, she sees this goal as "childish," even though it shows her independence and strength. The construct of womanhood demands identification with the feminine ideals of dependence and obedience⁴. A successful maturation is predicated upon accepting the idea of being economically dependent upon a man (Johnson 1993, 65). Once

⁴For an interesting discussion of what was considered adult behavior for women in the period between 1920 and 1950, please see Penny Tinkler's *Constructing Girlhood*. In her argument, Tinkler presents interesting evidence on how female adult status was portrayed in girl's magazines as being dependent upon an attachment to a male. For example, those who willingly chose to remain single earned the appellation "bachelor-girl," rather than "bachelor-woman," regardless of their age (Tinkler 1995, 135).

Mary no longer lives under the roof of her father and has not yet become dependent upon John, she is propelled backwards into her pre-pubertal state. This taste of independence will force Mary to break with her society in defiance.

The goal of both Anna Murphy and Mary Lavelle is similar. They are both searching for an identity beyond the ascribed roles. However, Mary, devoid of academic talent, obtains her freedom through a reckless action that forces a break between her and her formal life, precluding her reabsorption in her former social circle.

She thought of school and home, of John, of God's law and of sin, and did not let herself discard such thoughts. They existed, as real and true as ever, with all their traditional claims on her-- but this one claim was his, and she would answer it, taking the consequences. And as to John, she reflected with casuistic pity that what she was about to do now would make things easier for him. A moony story about being in love with a Spaniard would render him prolongedly unhappy and half-hopeful-- but this other news [that she is no longer a virgin], revolting him, would turn his heart away from her, and cure it (O'Brien 1936, 308).

Mary saves herself from a life of tedium and tepid affection from John through one single sex act which defies the code of virginal girlhood. "Ruined," she no longer is marriageable and is freed from her obligations to fulfill societal expectations.

Mary effectively uses Juanito as a tool to escape from her future. Although she justifies the sex by telling herself she is "in love" with him, she makes it clear that she neither desires nor expects further involvement with him.

She laughed as she let him have the last word. She had got her way and would stick to her terms. No more groans to frighten him. Let him dream. She had given him all she had, the first and best of herself, and had taken the pain of love from him, from whom alone she wanted it. She had been his lover. She was content (O'Brien 1936, 312).

She wants him as a lover, seduces him, and leaves him. This stereotypically "masculine" behavior provides her opportunity to escape her fate. She returns to Ireland to collect her hundred pounds and make her own way, exploding the fantasy of innocent, artless girlhood that the men around her had assumed.

Her travel education subverts its goal of making her a more interesting wife. Instead, it gives her potential to transcend her present state and a desire for individualism. Through Mary's dramatic separation, it becomes clear that to become a woman in her society one must submit to remaining eternally a girl-- dependent upon other's love or money, vacant of any kind of assertive, adult sexuality, innocent, artless, and beautiful. Because she is unwilling to attempt this impossible ideal, she is outcast.

Delia and the Caricature of Girlhood

Published in 1942, Maura Laverty's *Never No More* adheres closely to the Irish ideals described in the Introduction. Its narrative describes the maturation and brief formal education of Delia in a small rural village. After the death of her father, Delia moves in with her Gran, and this relationship forms the locus of the book which digresses often into colorful tales of countryside life. In his eager introduction to the book, Sean O'Faolain, writes " it is all the things that the romantic heart would wish a young girl to be and have. It [the book] has beauty, nostalgia, sentimentality (it drips with it); it has wisdom, folly, heartache, excess, generosity . . ." (O'Faolain 1942, vi). One wonders whether O'Faolain is describing the perfect book or the perfect girl. And, in fact, he is describing both. ✓

Maura Laverty gives the reader a representation of that impossible ideal of perpetual girlhood in her character Delia. In opposition to O'Brien, who is trying to depict a realistic individuation process that takes place in girlhood, Laverty makes a caricature of it. Delia and the story itself represent an innocence incompatible with any intelligent, industrious, and passionate person. She is a literary doll or plaything to be taken out and indulged in a fantasy of perpetual girlhood.

Perpetual girlhood places no value on skills for the future. Because Delia is content to remain a girl as long as her Gran is alive, she is not concerned with education in preparation for any kind of future. She is entirely unambitious, and what she describes in herself as "laziness" is an absolute passivity about the course her life will take. If Anna Murphy's central conflict with societal expectation is her desire to go to university and Mary Lavelle's is to not become a wife, Delia's conflict is her lack of motivation to become anything. Her only impetus to work or study is when she is closely supervised or in a desire to please those she loves. "I had no great taste for lessons and it's little work I would have done if Sister Mary Patrick who taught Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh, and knew that Grandmother wanted to make a teacher out of me, had not kept a close eye on me" (Lavery 1942, 76). As she matures and attends boarding school, again she reminds the reader of her lack of self-motivation. "More important still, to be left without supervision in the infirmary at night meant that I could read instead of studying. I made the most of this opportunity . . ." (Lavery 1942, 162). This lack of motivation is due to the fact that she cannot envision a future beyond a life with Gran, beyond dependency and girlishness, where she will need skills in order to survive.

Delia's Gran, an affectionate yet shrewd and intelligent woman, attempts to stress the importance of having skills to Delia, but Delia remains unaffected. Gran is more concerned with Delia's future than Delia is. This dynamic is evident when Delia voices her reluctance to go to school and her desire to remain at home with Gran.

"But I don't want to be a teacher, Gran"

"That's nonsense and you know it. Don't you want to make something of yourself? Don't you want to be able to make a decent living for yourself? You know there'll be little enough here for you when I'm gone."

"Couldn't I stay here and marry a farmer?"

"A nice-looking farmer's wife you'd make! A girl that couldn't boil a pot of pig's food to save her life. Have a bit of sense, child. You're not cut out for a farmer's wife, Delia, and that's sure and certain." (Lavery 1942, 158).

Here, Gran implies that Delia both lacks domestic skills and has too dreamy a temperament to deal with the daily practicalities of managing a farm house. Delia is not particularly interested in being a wife, either. She is simply concerned with finding a way to stay at Derrymore House and remaining a girl.

It is clear from the beginning of her education that Gran's aspirations for Delia will not be realized because Delia herself has no interest in them. "Personally, I was never conscious of any strong urge to devote my life to the moulding of youth, but I was quite willing to become a tight-rope walker or a female cobbler if that was what Gran wanted of me" (Lavery 1942, 131). Later, the reader finds out that, even in an effort to please Gran, Delia does not have the makings of a teacher. Consistent with her lack of motivation, she also has a lack of interest and ability in any academic subject except for poetry.

Anyway, studying never came easily to me. The bewildering rules and regulations attached to French made me wonder why the French people did not take to English instead. And algebra was to me what religious knowledge must have been to the Reddin boys (Lavery 1942, 182).

Intended as a quaint and charming description of a country girl's innocent mind, when this description is viewed as the representation of an ideal girlhood, it is quite disturbing. Her lack of an attempt to appreciate other cultures or to grasp abstract logic shows the genesis of an adult who will spend her life in useless ignorance, not innocence.

That is the central crisis in Lavery's characterization of the ideal-- there is nowhere for Delia to go, nowhere for her mind or talents to evolve because she must retain this infantilized innocence. After Gran dies, there is a vague suggestion that Delia will go to Spain to become a child-minder in an effort to "make a clean break" from Gran. Gran is dead. Delia's girlhood and dependence are over. Yet, she is unprepared for adulthood, so she is effectively exiled from the novel. Once the result of perpetual innocent girlishness is

apparent, there is no place for the narrative to progress and Delia drowns in the failure of the novel's own propaganda.

Conclusion:

From the work of Lesley Johnson, it is clear that in the early twentieth century, effort was made to formally educate girls in the skills of femininity. The motivation for this sex-based curriculum was that girls were being prepared for the adult female roles they were expected to shoulder as they matured. In Kate O'Brien's *The Land of Spices*, female education is represented both as a means of escaping these roles and a forum for learning traditional feminine skills. In her balanced representation, O'Brien shows how education is tailored towards the future goals of a girl and explores how a girl who desires to transcend the conventional might find avenues to create the opportunity for continuing her intellectual development. This same theme is explored at a different point in development in *Mary Lavelle*. Already engaged to fulfill a conventional role, Mary Lavelle uses passion, rather than intelligence, to escape what Anna has been able to preempt. Both of O'Brien's novels represent girlhood as a period where the individual struggles with the yoke of societal expectation and the construct of femininity. To highlight this struggle, Delia in *Never No More* is offered as a foil to Anna and Mary. Her characterization as a model of the conventional, shows a girl in harmony with her environment who neither questions nor struggles against feminine roles. O'Brien and Laverty's conflicting representations of girlhood and female identity formation highlight the different ways that authors have responded to accepted beliefs in creating their fictions. O'Brien shows that with creativity and passion, her heroines can escape. As the discussion focuses on Edna O'Brien, a

vision where hope of escape is impossible will be examined as another author's exploration of female development.

3

Dependence and Destruction: Psychoanalytic Theory and the Representation of Sexual Development in Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls*

In early twentieth century Ireland, the depiction of female sexuality had to be carefully controlled because it was incompatible with the ideal of the secular Irish Madonna discussed in the Introduction. One impossible aspect of this ideal was that women were supposed to achieve a state of chaste motherhood, bearing children for the Nation, without having any sexuality of their own.

Her world revolves around the twin poles of Altar and Hearth. She barely exists in her own right; she is simply a channel for the life-giving milk of Irish Ireland . . . Although she possesses, by implication, the attributes of fecundity, these are stressed at the expense and to the exclusion of any expression of individual sexuality (Hywel 1991, 25).

Although this state of motherhood in virginity should most likely be reserved for individuals approaching the divine, this ideal of the secular Madonna exerted great influence over the perception of female sexuality. Its legacy is perhaps what made Edna O'Brien's explicit portrayal of sexuality in *The Country Girls Trilogy* so shocking. In Grace Eckley's *Edna O'Brien*, she speculates that the books were banned because they gave a negative representation of Irish life. They did not adhere to the cultural propaganda of a religious society (Eckley 1974, 24) and were viewed as a threat to the chaste image of Ireland.

Although O'Brien's writing style may be modern and explicit, the psychology of the girls she is describing-- their attitude towards and motivation to have sex-- is extremely

conventional. The girls themselves adopt traditional, negative stereotypes about women and act in accordance with them.

I hate being a woman. Vain and shallow and superficial. Tell a woman that you love her and she'll ask you to write it down so that she can show it to her friends (O'Brien 1960, 161).

There are no innocent girls, I thought. They're all scarlet girls like Baba, with guile in their eyes (O'Brien 1960, 212).

Through these girls' sexual maturation, O'Brien describes a female psychology where self worth is dependent upon a woman or girl's ability to attract the desire of a man. Because the girls operate under the assumption that they are incomplete without male attention and affection, they are motivated to use their sexuality as a vehicle for pleasing men and maintaining relationships, rather than for their own pleasure. In "Edna O'Brien: A Kind of Irish Childhood," Darcy O'Brien contends that O'Brien writes about sex with a reference to shame or guilt that heightens pleasure (O'Brien 1982, 186). As will be discussed later, O'Brien goes to great lengths to show that sex is not pleasurable for Caithleen. The source of the feelings of shame or guilt are the result of her using sex as a manipulation, not from the sexual acts themselves. Caithleen views sex as her only bargaining tool, exhausting it in an attempt to gain the thing she most craves-- love. Her sexuality is false, predatory, and manipulative. Most importantly, because it is used as a bargaining chip, it is not even her own to enjoy creatively. It is a slave to male desires and wants.

In Search of the Father: False Fulfillment and the Phallus

... the reason I think on the whole that women are more discontent than men is . . . that there is, there must be, in every man and every woman the desire, the deep primeval desire to go back to the womb. Now physically and technically really . . . a man partly and symbolically achieves this when he goes into a woman. He goes in and becomes sunken and lost in her. A woman never, ever approaches that kind of security.

-- Edna O'Brien in a 1965 interview with Nell Dunn
(Eckley 1974, 30).

The idea that the feminine ego depends upon its maturation or completeness through a relationship with a man has its roots in psychoanalytic theory. A girl's sexual and psychological development are supposed to be shaped through a variety of realizations, experiences, and separations that will eventually lead her to seek fulfillment through a sexual and romantic relationship with a man. O'Brien's approach to Caithleen's characterization is pregnant with the key ideas of this theory of female sexual development. Because the reader follows Caithleen's development from early childhood, it is possible to see how her dependence on men for comfort, affection, and eventually sanity, manifests itself.

The first of these ideas is that homoeroticism is a juvenile experimentation in preparation for adult sexuality. (Inside the confines of this theory, adult sexuality is concordant with heterosexuality.) Adolescence is a plastic period where sexual identity occurs through mimesis, beginning with the self. If the first sexual object is the self, this will naturally lead to homosexual desire in childhood, only to be later translated into heterosexual desire.

In Prince's scenario of origins, the initial sexuality of both boys and girls is equally not heterosexual but homosexual, in the sense that it first arises in the form of an autoeroticism that develops via suggestion into a homosexual love of the same before it is later transformed into heterosexual desire (Leys 1992, 186).

This view of homosexuality as the template for subsequent mature adult sexual behavior is also discussed in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*. Simone de Beauvoir views homosexual experimentation as part of female narcissism and self-love, where the girl accepts herself as the ultimate "object" rather than "subject" (de Beauvoir 1949, 360). The girl knows that she will become the "object" in heterosexual relationships and prepares for this objectification through making other women the object of her own affections. Simone de Beauvoir views the girl-child's lesbian experimentation as an extension of autoeroticism;

it is a "playing at love" which will prepare the girl for the more challenging and daunting world of heterosexuality (de Beauvoir 1949, 365). Loving oneself or loving another woman is seen as lower in the sexual development scale. The culmination of female sexuality is successful mating with a man.

These models for thinking about female sexual development closely match the description of Caithleen's. Her first sexual partner is her friend, Baba, yet she never considers homosexuality as a viable option for romantic or erotic fulfillment. "The elm grove was where the cows went to be cool in summertime and where the flies followed them. . . . Baba and I sat there and shared secrets, and once we took off our knickers in there and tickled one another. The greatest secret of all" (O'Brien 1960, 8). This homoeroticism is completely dismissed as the girls reach puberty. Like Prince and de Beauvoir's theories, the girls' attitude suggests that homosexual contact is only an experimental preparation for official, adult heterosexuality.

The love of women is always seen as second best and unable to fill the void that Caithleen feels. After being abandoned by Eugene, Baba's loyal friendship and affection are not enough for Caithleen to feel comforted or safe.

I slept with Baba in the single bed, and once in near-sleep I thought that her arm around my stomach was his arm, and I woke up, relieved, only to face the truth again, and the emptiness. That was the time I missed him worst. Baba's arm was around me, but it was his body I smelled, the sweet and languid smell of his body in sleep, . . . and the warmth which had enveloped us, night after night (O'Brien 1960, 365-366).

Approaching adulthood, Caithleen no longer views a woman's caress or affection as fulfilling. Without male attention, she is plagued by "emptiness." Neither Prince nor de Beauvoir explain how this "transformation" to heterosexual desire occurs. However, an explanation for Caithleen's rejection of Baba's friendship for a self-destructive relationship with a middle aged man may be adequately explained by the theories of Jacques Lacan.

Although the only two people in her life who have genuinely loved Caithleen are women, she is only concerned with getting and keeping the attention and love of a man. Caithleen seems to live under the ideology of Lacan's theory where woman represents lack which can only achieve the phallus or the power it represents by reflecting and affirming males (Minsky 1996, 171). When someone loves her, then she is safe and worthy. When she is rejected, she becomes worthless again. In bed with Baba, Caithleen describes an "emptiness" that is viewing oneself as lack-- incomplete without male attention. Without this attention, there is no "relief" from feeling the emptiness of being lack.

This explanation may seem logical under the confines of Lacanian theory. However, in practicality, Caithleen's feelings appear counterintuitive and self-destructive. Throughout their relationship Eugene ridicules her body and her manner and criticizes her thinking. He convinces Caithleen that she is extremely privileged to be his lover, but he offers her no real love or affection. It seems that relief would come from being free of that abusive behavior. In Baba, Caithleen is offered an alternative to this degradation. Despite petty jealousies and bickering, Baba is always represented as being a faithful friend. This is not to suggest that Caithleen should seek women as erotic partners. What is important here is that no other kind of relationship, no matter how loving, fulfills Caithleen. She feels fulfillment can only come through a romantic attachment to a man. This severely limits her opportunities to be happy and makes them completely dependent upon acceptance of another. The reader is left wondering what need in Caithleen drives her to the masochism of rejecting those who truly love her to pursue a verbally abusive partner. /

The answer to this question can also be found in Lacan. Lacan describes how sexual desire is instigated by the girl's realization that she is symbolically castrated. Because she does not have the phallus, she loses her mother to the one who does have the

phallus-- the father (Minsky 1996, 140). "In other words, it is the loss of the mother to the father which leaves a space in identity which installs Desire as a permanent feature of who we are" (Minsky 1996, 140). Caithleen is an extreme example of this phenomenon. She not only symbolically loses her mother's love, her mother is dead. Caithleen is profoundly affected by that separation because her father is also emotionally unavailable. Because desire is created by the need that results from the loss of parental love, Caithleen's orphan status leads to her desire to have sexual relationships with older men. If one accepts Lacan's theory, Caithleen's attraction to older men can be interpreted as her attempt to look for the phallic power represented in her father by coupling with older men. As an extension of this idea, her atypical sexual desire for middle-aged men is based on the hope that they will replace the love and closeness she has lost from her parents and make her feel complete again.

This desire will strongly influence Caithleen's choice of partners. Because she rejects her peers for older men, she becomes socially isolated and even further dependent on their affection for her self worth. Caithleen is not the victim of pedophiles. She actively seeks out the attentions of older men and is not attracted to boys or young men her own age. Her need for a father figure is expressed in her choice for her first heterosexual partner, Mr. Gentleman. The fact that he is essentially a pedophile, who begins his seduction on the day she buys her school uniform, never seems to frighten Caithleen because she is so entrenched in the fantasy of receiving love from this older man. In fact, her attraction to him is highly sexually charged for a little girl. In the car she thinks about "his mouth, of the shape of it, and the taste of his tongue" (O'Brien 1960, 53). She relates "[t]here was something about him that made me want to be with him" (O'Brien 1960, 53).

Only later will it become clear that the "something" she wants is a father-figure whose phallic fulfillment she can vicariously share in by coupling with him.

Mr. Gentleman provides Caithleen with her first sexual experience, but it is really in her relationship with Eugene Gaillard that Caithleen's desire for a father figure is most evident. Living in Dublin, she chooses and pursues a middle-aged man for her lover out of all the possible men in the city. Described as balding with an ashen complexion, Eugene is not the typical love object of a young girl. While they are looking in the mirror together, he even acknowledges his age and relative unattractiveness when calls their image "the old man and the girl" (O'Brien 1960, 233). How they relate to one another is atypical as well. Caithleen is his protégé. He admonishes her, teaches her how to dress and speak, and even how to have sex. Eugene does not force these changes in Caithleen out of paternal concern. Rather, he uses them as opportunities to ridicule and control her.

Then I remembered-- as one does in a temper-- the ugly side of his nature: of how cross he could be, of the day he shouted, "You're a mechanical idiot who can't even turn off a tap." . . . His jibes and pinpricks leaped to memory-- "Baba, when I have a harem you'll be in it," "I'm teaching Kate how to speak English before I take her into society," and "Run upstairs on your peasant legs." For that hour I hated him (O'Brien 1960, 335).

The relationship is completely unequal. Eugene has all of the power and Caithleen is constantly begging to be thought worthy of his company and affection.

It is not until she is slightly older that Caithleen acknowledges that she never has interest in relationships with her peers.

We gave a lift for part of the way to two young men who were making the journey to a youth hostel seventeen miles away. They sat in the back seat, whispering; . . . They were about my age, and it occurred to me that I ought to be with them, walking from one village to the next, worrying about nothing more than the price of a cup of tea. But then I consoled myself with the thought that young men, with their big knees and awkward voices, bored me (O'Brien 1960, 330).

Caithleen is bored by these boys because they cannot give her the false sense of security that Eugene does. They are incapable of acting the role of the father because they are just

as confused and needy as she is. In this passage, it becomes apparent how Caithleen has almost been robbed of her childhood by this overwhelming drive to have the love and attention of a father figure. She has lost out on all of the experiences of adolescence-- school, travel, friendships, dating-- because she is locked away in a country house with an aging lover.

Besides Baba, Caithleen has no real friends of her own, and is left to derive all of her social needs and affirmation from Eugene. Her relationship with him only serves to isolate her further from her peers, causing her to become more dependent than ever. Morally quarantined in Eugene's house, she realizes how her need for the affection of an older male has robbed her of normalcy and a social network.

Sitting in the big flagged kitchen, I thought of Baba and cried. I missed her. I had never been alone before in my whole life, alone and dependent upon my own resources. I thought with longing of all the evenings we went out together, reeking with vanilla essence and good humor. . . . "Oh, God," I said, remembering Baba, my father, everyone; and I buried my face in my hands and cried, not knowing what I cried for (O'Brien 1960, 307).

With a touch of dramatic irony, the reader is quite aware of what Caithleen cries for-- her lost childhood, her need of her parents' love. Instead, what she gets is a cheap substitute of indifferent caretaking from Eugene. That evening, Caithleen tells Eugene about her past. He understands Caithleen's needs better than she does when he says, "So we both need a father" (O'Brien 1960, 311). However, Eugene is prepared neither to fulfill those needs nor release Caithleen so she can create a life for herself.

If Caithleen's sexual desire is geared toward older men because she is looking to fill the void caused by the withdrawal of parental love, her sexual behavior is almost solely motivated towards keeping that man happy. Because the men she dates, Eugene specifically, become her entire self-worth, Caithleen becomes desperate to maintain the relationship. Sex becomes a tool in that maintenance. Even though there are many

indications that Caithleen is not ready to have sex, does not desire it, and gets no pleasure from it, she engages in sexual activity to please the fantasies and needs of the men whose attachment she desires.

At no point in the book does Caithleen fantasize about the sex act or desire it physically, independent of the romantic attachment. Her descriptions of sex are comic, and her desire is confined to the hint of cinematic romance imparted through kissing. The factual descriptions of her sexual experiences have a quality of numbness and detachment. She is never caught up in the moment or swept away with physical pleasure and sensation. It is clear that she does not enjoy it and does it only to please the man. This attitude is displayed the first time she sees Mr. Gentleman naked.

I looked down slyly at his body and laughed a little. I was so ridiculous. "What's so funny?" He was piqued that I should laugh. "It's the color of the pale part of my orchid," I said, and I looked over at my orchid, which was still pinned to my cardigan. I touched it. Not my orchid. His. It was soft and incredibly tender, like the inside of a flower, and it stirred. It reminded me when it stirred of a little black man on the top of a penny bank that shook his head every time you put a coin in the box (O'Brien 1960, 165).

Curiously, she describes Eugene's penis with the same symbol of the flower.

I remembered the funny hang of the pouch between his hairy thighs and how I had been afraid. "It won't bite you," he said, and to the touch it grew miraculously like a flower between the clasp of my fingers (O'Brien 1960, 243).

It is almost as if Caithleen is reading from a script or has gotten her ideas from a novel. There is nothing genuine or creative in her sexual expression. What should be exciting, exploratory experiences are merely comic episodes because of the unsuitability of the partners.

That Caithleen gets little pleasure from her sexual encounters does not motivate her to explore her own sexuality further. She is content only to kiss her lovers and is incredibly afraid of anything more intimate. The idea that kissing is good and romantic and

anything else is frightening and unpalatable is repeated several times throughout the narrative.

A kiss. Nothing more. My imagination did not go beyond that. It was afraid to. . . .
But kisses were beautiful (O'Brien 1960, 145).

I was happy lying there, just kissing him; bed was too final for me, so I sat up and put my arms around my knees (O'Brien 1960, 228).

I loved kissing him. I thought, If only people just kissed, if all love stopped at that (O'Brien 1960, 233).

Kissing is important to her because it represents someone loving her, and love is what she wants most. In some ways Caithleen's fear of sex is just virginal innocence, but what is interesting is that her fear is not counterbalanced by desire or curiosity. It is strange that she does not fantasize what might come next. Even in her imagination, her sexuality is not her own. She cannot engage in fantasy without it being linked to some emotional need that she seeks to fulfill through a man. Instead, all of her sexual performances are in response to the needs and demands of the man she wants to keep in a relationship.

Because she feels no pleasure and has no fantasies of her own, Caithleen's sexuality is dictated by her male partners. Exchanging sex for caretaking or affection, Caithleen learns to use sex to manipulate her partners into attachments. The manipulative use of her sexuality evolves gradually through the course of the trilogy. In her very first sexual experiences with Mr. Gentleman, Caithleen is innocent, yet has a healthy dose of assertive curiosity. Her sexual experiences belong to her own pleasure at this early stage, but she already begins to link sex with older men and the eradication of pain or problems in her mind.

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 that I had suffered up to then was comforted in the softness of his soft, lispng voice, whispering, whispering, like the snowflakes. . . . He kissed me. It was a real kiss. It affected my entire body. My toes, though they were numb and pinched in the new shoes, responded to that kiss, and for a few minutes my soul was lost (O'Brien 1960, 90).

Mr. Gentleman's display of sexual affection makes everything seem alright for that one moment. This first experience sets up a pattern where Caithleen becomes almost addicted to caresses to forget about pain, much as someone would be addicted to alcohol to forget.

Caithleen is too scared to have sex with Eugene, and she starts to cry several times when he attempts to seduce her. After Eugene finally gets frustrated and takes her home she thinks to herself, "A minute later, I longed to be in his arms, unafraid, pleasing him. More than anything I longed to please him" (O'Brien 1960, 236). However, Caithleen never talks about pleasing herself. She only wishes to get over her fear so Eugene will become more attached to her, more responsible for her.

Motivated by a fear that she will lose Eugene after the scene with her father, Caithleen attempts to seduce him. Knowing too well that what she is really trying to do is create intimacy so that he will not leave her, he refuses:

"You can get into bed with me, if you like," I said.
"No, no." He shook his head, gave me a dry kiss. "When we make love to one another, it will be because we want to."
"But I want to," I said.
"You do, but it's for the wrong reason. You want to involve me, that's all. You know that once I've made love to you, I shall feel responsible for you." He looked into my eyes and I looked away guiltily (O'Brien 1960, 288).

As mentioned earlier, the source of guilt is the manipulation, not the sexual act itself.

Caithleen knows she is trying to trap Eugene into loving her with the bait of her body.

Not only does Caithleen want Eugene to take care of her, and thinks she can secure this through sex, she also wants to gain a false sense of security through physical closeness. A few lines later she thinks, "He had a strong, hard body and I wanted him to

shield me from them and from everything that I was afraid of" (O'Brien 1960, 288).

Although Caithleen's behavior is indicative of a frightened girl, the scenario expresses an extremely conventional idea about women's sexuality-- that women "tolerate" sex for the sake of achieving emotional intimacy; sex is work that needs to be done to secure a mate. There is no discussion of Caithleen's curiosity, her own physical needs, pleasures, and desires⁵.

Even her desire to have a child is motivated by a wish to keep Eugene. Instead of wanting a child out of parental feelings, she thinks of it as an efficient way of chaining Eugene to her forever. When she becomes jealous of his estranged wife and daughter, Caithleen thinks to herself, "He's making a choice between me and them, and I wished that I could have a baby in some easy, miraculous way" (O'Brien 1960, 350). She will do anything to keep from having to feel the emptiness or fear created by the lack of a man in her life. Caithleen's motivation for sexual expression is out of panic, not eroticism. She fears she will be abandoned again as she was with her parents. Unlike her parents, she can induce Eugene to stay with her by having sex or bearing his child.

One of the tragic elements of Caithleen's sad story is that for all of her panic-stricken motivations, she always fails to secure the commitment, affection, and intimacy that she hopes to gain through sex. She learns too late that sex can be completely separate from love, and that there are important psychological consequences of her manipulations. To assuage her guilt at devaluing herself in this way and to lessen the feelings of panic, Caithleen deludes herself with the idea that she was "married" by sharing the sex act with Eugene. Eugene instigates and perpetuates this fantasy by purchasing a fake ring and

⁵This portrayal of Caithleen's motivation to have sex is consistent with the expectations of female adolescent sexuality reported by Barbara Hudson in Chapter One, where the purpose of girls having sex is not supposed to be for their own enjoyment, but as a display of their ability to form intimacies with males (Hudson 1984, 47).

calling their lovemaking a "honeymoon." Caithleen instinctively knows it is a sham, yet she attempts to convince herself and others that it is true. The culmination of her rationalizations is when she wants to explain herself to a washroom attendant:

"It's alright," I said. "I got married today." I had to say it to someone. She shook my hand and tears filled her kind eyes as she wished me a long life of happiness. I cried a bit myself, to keep her company. She was motherly; I longed to stay there and tell her the truth and have her assurances that I had done the right thing, but that would have been ridiculous, so I came away (O'Brien 1960, 315).

Here, the reader is reminded again that what Caithleen really wants is parental love and affection, not sex with an older man. She needs support and advice, but none is available because she is orphaned. She tries to convince herself "it's alright" but she knows that the reason she "got married" or had sex was not for love, but out of fear of being alone and feeling empty again.

Soon after, Caithleen begins to understand the limitations that sex has in creating and maintaining romantic relationships. She realizes that sex does not make her the powerful manipulator of situations or in a position to demand affection. The first time she and Eugene have sex after resolving a conflict, her alienation from him is painfully evident and she realizes that physical closeness does not yield emotional intimacy:

That night, when he loved me and sank into me, I thought to myself, it is only with our bodies that we really forgive one another; the mind pretends to forgive, but it harbors and remembers in moments of blackness. And even in loving him, I remembered our difficulties, the separated, different world that each came from; he controlled, full of bile and intolerance, knowing everyone, knowing everything-- me swayed or frightened by every wind, light-headed, mad in one eye (as he said), bred in (as he said again) "Stone Age ignorance and religious savagery." I prayed to St. Jude, patron of hopeless cases (O'Brien 1960, 345).

I cried and felt wretched and swore at everything for being so cruel. It was such a shock to me to know that he could love me at night and yet seem to become a stranger in the daytime and say to me, "Do you take sugar?" (O'Brien 1960, 356).

The fact that Eugene routinely ridicules and mocks Caithleen, is only more degrading because of the physical intimacy they share. It does not make them closer. It only gratifies

him physically and makes Caithleen feel worse about herself. Instead of moving away from Eugene, she believes that by increasing the intimacy, she will overcome the limitations of the relationship. It never occurs to Caithleen that she should leave Eugene, create her own life, and find someone who she is genuinely attracted to and who treats her with respect. Perhaps this thought does not occur because she has no education, no skills, and few relationships outside of Eugene with which to build a life of her own. Eugene has become her whole identity and her self-worth is dependent upon his approval. Motivated by fear, her sexuality becomes a tool used rather poorly in an attempt to navigate a relationship over which she has no control.

Conclusion:

At the end of the trilogy, Caithleen ends up alone and penniless, which eventually provokes her suicide. Her life begins and ends in a desperate attempt to find the love and security that she craves. The projection of her developmental course echoes that described by psychoanalytic theory. Because of the symbolic and literal loss of parental love, she seeks the fulfillment, security, and power represented in the phallus through coupling with men. To the exclusion of all other types of love or friendship, she pursues romantic and sexual attachment almost to obsession. O'Brien's novel is a study of psychological neediness acting as an extremely destructive force. Living by the code of romance and accepting the feminine trait of emotional dependence is fatal in this representation of female maturation. In looking for fulfillment outside herself, Caithleen finds nothing but rejection, frustration, and eventually death.

Conclusion

As discussed in the Introduction, the ideal women were expected to approximate in early twentieth century Ireland was the secular Madonna figure who was a sexless nurturer of both family and Irish culture. In reality, this ideal exerted enormous pressure on women to appropriate the role of wife and mother to the exclusion of all others. In the creation of their heroines, Kate O'Brien, Maura Laverty, and Edna O'Brien respond to the pressure of this ideal by imagining a female development that either subverts, negotiates, or supports its constructs. Because female development is a vast subject area, this paper has focused on the areas of education and sexuality, using sociological studies and psychoanalytic theory to add complexity and a fresh or provocative perspective to the question of identity formation.

Chapter One discusses the particular problem of attempting to negotiate an adult identity under the strictures of femininity. Both Simone de Beauvoir and Barbara Hudson illustrate how the two states are incompatible. For de Beauvoir, the central drama of female development is that a girl must submit to being the Object, when she is fully aware of her legitimacy as Subject. For Hudson, adolescence, a masculine identified state, and femininity are subversive to one another. A girl cannot simultaneously retain the label of "feminine" and pursue autonomy or individuality. Being a woman becomes synonymous with retaining the attributes of girlhood, namely dependence and passivity. In each of the texts, with the exception of *Never No More*, the authors attempt to either describe this dilemma or offer their heroines a creative solution to transcend it.

Chapter Two examines how education functions as a preparation for the appropriation of roles consistent with the label of femininity, specifically wife and mother.

Kate O'Brien responds to this convention by offering solutions for her heroines to escape the confines of these roles, either through being academically exceptional or through socially exiling herself. In contrast, Maura Laverty supports the dominant paradigm, describing the cultural ideal, but offering no portrayal of a successful female existence beyond girlhood.

Chapter Three discusses Edna O'Brien's attempt at exploding the ideal of the Irish secular Madonna through her explicit portrayal of sexuality in *The Country Girls*. Using psychoanalytic theory to deconstruct the portrayal of Caithleen's sexual development, elucidates her overwhelming need for male sexual or romantic attachment to the exclusion of all other relationships. The portrayal of this obsessive neediness shows the destructive nature of the idealization of feminine dependency. O'Brien's Caithleen is unable to formulate a positive adult identity because of her particular psychological neediness.

Kate O'Brien attempts to avoid this cyclical negativity by representing her heroines' individuation process as a fight for the right of self-determination. Purchasing time to dream of a future outside of the traditional role seems to be the solution out of this paradox. For Edna O'Brien, the struggle is internal. Transcending the stricture of female roles is not a socioeconomic problem, but a psychological one. It is her particular need of love and the experience of her early loss of her parents which makes Caithleen vulnerable to all of the negative dependency that society has allocated to femininity. Each representation of female development shows what the authors believed to be the nucleus of the crisis in maturation that de Beauvoir and Hudson describe. Ultimately, it is clear that one can change society's approach to girlhood, but without eradicating the particular vulnerability that Edna O'Brien describes, there will be no transcendence.

This project began with a hope of uncovering the same "proto-feminist" truth that Walshe describes in the Introduction. Instead, three very different visions of girlhood were offered by these authors-- one engaged in hopeful struggle with patriarchal institutions, one oblivious, and one doomed by an overwhelming internal sense of emptiness. Through the interaction among these representations, it is evident what a girl was supposed to be and what an author's imagination may have desired her to be. More importantly, it is also apparent how the disparity between those two states was for some authors overwhelming enough to render the heroine's successful negotiation of that disparity unimaginable.

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